

This is a pet-project of mine, mainly to see how I would fare writing a multi-chaptered fic. I'll be writing it on my spare time which I don't really have that much of and I won't be spending the time on re-reading for grammatical errors. And such comments about my spelling will be ignored.

There will be romance between Harry and a canon character but this story is based heavily on family and such the pairing won't be appearing until later although hinted at several times as it builds. Love is building, not direct and you evolve through life, making choices and such. Anyway, I haven't added the pairing in the list of characters as I want to make it somewhat of a surprise.

As you have probably figured out from the brief summary this Harry as a Muggle and he will remain a muggle. There will be no super powers or sudden return of magic or anything of the sort. Harry is very much human and without magic and I will do my best to portray him as such. And since he's muggle he'll be spending most of his time in the muggle world and such this story will contain OC characters as you'll note immediately.

My OC characters have as far been commented on having depth and I'm trying to make them as real as possible and hopefully you won't be finding the idea too repulsive. I know stomaching OC characters can be hard but give it a chance.

Also, no evil Harry's family or brother – once again, family based fic. Also, note that A/N will be few so when they appear they will probably be of interest.

Thank you for your time and I hope you enjoy Ace of Spades.

Love, Undead Artist.

Ace of Spades

You focus on the trivial, and lose sight of what's most important. Change is impossible, in this fog of ignorance. How can we evolve when regulation is all we know?

Dice of Destiny

"Harry! I know you're in here somewhere 'cause Ms Wesley is looking for you and she's looking downright furious. I gotta say the pink spots to the neon blue hair was a nice touch but you probably should stop signing your name on her forehead for, well, obvious reason- FUCK!" John made an odd squawking sound and jerked backwards in shock as Harry dropped from the canopy above in an elegant crouch, a smirk plastered across his face.

Hands on his hips where dark cargo shorts slipped low and head cocked to the side Harry regarded his fallen friend with a kind of arrogance that only came from the self-awareness of being handsome and good at what he did. "You called?" Harry drawled.

Tall for his age with jet black messy hair, wild green eyes and sharp angular features tanned by the sun Harry made an impressive sight and John had always envied him for the way he called attention simply by being there but at the same time could melt into the shadows with a frightening expertise.

John would never be anything special compared to Harry. He was average in almost everything he did and would've been failing spectacularly in school if Harry didn't actually take the time to help him out. He had short shaggy blonde hair and his face was covered by freckles. He was slim but lacked the wiry muscles of his best friend and his skin was pale and eyes dark blue.

John scrambled to his feet, dusting himself off indignantly. "A simple word would've been nice." He huffed in irritation, glaring through a fringe of light hair. "A 'hi John!' wouldn't hurt you, or even 'hey, you!' instead of dropping down from above like some damn ape!" John crossed his arms.

Harry raised an eyebrow before taking a large bite of his apple, looking distinctively unimpressed. "It's not my fault that you don't learn." He began walking.

"Learn?" John fumbled to catch the apple as hurried to catch up to him. He regarded the half-eaten apple with a touch of exasperation. "What do you mean learn? Scaring me half to death is supposed to teach me what?" He took a bite of the green apple and promptly spat it out, grimacing and brushing his tongue against his shirt to rid it of the taste.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Once you understand the lesson you will understand its meaning."

John made a grimace at his back. "Jab, jab, jab – you gotta stop those good awful answers of you. It's like you want to make my head spin." John stuck out his tongue in disgust.

"It's called thinking John. But you wouldn't know much about that, would you?" Harry bent down to pick up his shoes and socks at the foot of a large tree. John blinked, realising for the first time that his friend was barefoot.

"You're like an ape. A tree climbing, wild, riddle speaking ape that-," Harry had shrugged into his boots and without much regard dodged into the thick bosage, "doesn't even have the decency of listening to your friends." John rolled his eyes skyward and climbed after him.

So deep into the forest the trees were growing in number and branches knotted wildly and thickly with each other and John had to struggle as his t-shirt and jeans got caught by grabby branches and he tripped over roots and stones. "You know Harry," John jerked impatiently at the leaves and sticks caught in his hair, "for once it would be nice if we played something else but 'leading John into the wild'. It's not a favourite of mine and mom is especially annoyed with me for skipping out during school hours. Nearly got me skinned alive last month when you took me to that stupid lake in the middle of the night." He growled and stomped down on a large branch in annoyance only to duck with a squeak as the other end slammed up to meet his face. Harry caught it before it could hit its mark and John scowled at the bemused look and cocked eyebrow and longed to sink his teeth into that damn curling index fingers of his that beckoned him to follow.

"Doesn't your mom get angry?" John asked as he wormed his way under a large fallen trunk. "I mean Mrs Potter didn't seem particularly lenient but maybe that's just... how I... wow." John had to struggle not to gape at the meadow spreading out before him. Bluish purple flowers spread elegantly and in diversity in a perfect circular meadow with a deep dark pool of water centred in the middle in a smaller circle. "Just where in the world are we?" He breathed.

"Approximately five miles east of the school, give or take. But knowing that you still won't ever find this place without me."

John crouched down to touch one of the flowers but Harry's hand caught him around his wrist before he could. "They're poisonous." Harry pulled John to his feet and tugged his dazed friend with him. John who was feeling distinctively thankful for his mom who had deemed it prudent to force him to wear long jeans could only gape.

"This is insane." John muttered. "Simply insane. This shouldn't be possible and, and - poisonous flowers, really? Mom would've warned me – you know mom. 'Don't touch that John' and 'Don't stare at that John'" John quoted mockingly. "I know every single dangerous plant in these woods thanks to her."

"She wouldn't have heard of these. They're called Daspardius Milumbius and just a touch will send your entire arm into a state of numbness. Eating the petals will result in incurable paralysis that will only leave your eyes flickering helplessly as your heart and brain keeps your body alive and aware with prickling, never-ending pain."

It was only pride that kept John from jumping Harry's back and demand a ride as Harry weaved through the Daspardius Milumbius, the tallest brushing just beneath the edge of his socks. Reaching the lake was a blessing in disguise as Harry rounded on him with a glint in his eyes that belied all humour and made his stomach knot. "John, I need you to do me a favour."

And what could John do but agree?

The lake hadn't looked inviting in the slightest from distance with its dark depths and tiptoeing out in the lukewarm water didn't change that perception in the slightest. Distinctively aware of the rope around his middle John glanced back anxiously at Harry who made a shooing gesture and smiled in what John perceived to be some sort of encouragement.

Swallowing John wondered not for the first time what inspired his fierce loyalty for Harry when the older boy seemed to have dedicated his life into getting John into as much trouble as was humanly possible

But John knew he was kidding himself before he'd even finished the thought. Harry got him into a lot of things but it was also thanks to Harry he was even able to get into anything.

Two years back and John's older brother Anthony had snapped after getting into trouble with a gang had dragged into a horse load of depths. The leader had given him an ultimatum, kill John or be killed – as Anthony screamed and cried, sobbing as he was jostled away by the police. Harry who had an uncanny ability to track down trouble had nosed it up and interrupted. Harry had taken two shots meant for him before he'd managed to throw himself over the older boy and finally overpowering him.

John still had nightmares about it. Harry descending on Anthony like some kind of demon and he'd been an absolute mess of blood and bruises when the ambulance finally arrived. John had heard about Harry before then, of course, who hadn't in Mary Alice School? Eccentric Harry Potter who vanished for hours from school but performed flawlessly on his tests, a troublemaker who enjoyed pranking the teachers and students alike for performing unfairly or cruelly. Harry Potter who drew people like moths to flame but showed no interest of accepting anyone as a friend and appeared almost standoffish with a secretive smirk and dark brooding eyes.

Harry was two classes above him and John had been shocked to find the older boy waiting for him two weeks after the incident, arm still in a sling and face patched up. They'd been a team since and John got the feeling that Harry had kind of taken him under his proverbial wing so to say, adopted him of sorts and no matter how his mother complained she never got angry with Harry, not really.

John had finally turned twelve but felt much like his ten year old self whenever Harry mussed up his hair or tapped his forehead with his index and middle fingers with a smile that made his stomach curl with warmth.

A most peculiar feeling.

Taking a deep breath John spared Harry a last glance and steeled his nerves before diving. John was insanely glad that it was summer as he kicked his feet and pinched his nose and blowing to keep the pressure from building as he fought his way deeper. He forced his eyes open even as it stung and searched for the small object Harry had described to him.

A golden spinning top.

Whatever Harry wanted it for eluded him but it seemed to mean something for him, a lost childhood object perhaps? John didn't particularly care and he combed the pool sides, paddling deeper and deeper. Several times he had to swim up for more air and every time intense green eyes made him dive back down. A flash of something human like made him think of mermaids and John nearly choked his last at the absurdity of his imagination as he paddled towards the illusion his eyes had spared him only to find to his shock just what he'd been looking for, glowing dully in the dark depths.

Grabbing hold of it John grinned impishly as he swam for the surface. Harry heaved him ashore and as John breathed out he inspected the spinning top. At first glance it looked deceptively simple with a dull golden colour but as John squinted closer he could see the miniature ridges engraved into the surface.

"So what is it?" John asked as he scrubbed his hair dry with Harry's shirt which had been kindly supplied. He tried not to stare at the two round holes in Harry's chest; one in his left shoulder and the other low on his right ribcage.

"A spinning top." Harry's arm encircled his waist and tugged him close. "Thank you, for doing that. It means a lot to me."

Questions bubbled inside John. About why Harry couldn't do it himself, he knew the older boy could swim and why the spinning top meant so much. But, John decided as he leaned his head against his friend's shoulder, those questions could wait for the future, if ever. Sometimes it was better to let things be, as Harry would say.

Ace of Spades

"Harry!" John turned his laughter into a series of coughs as the Prince of dignity himself was smothered into a large squishy hug only to squawk in protest as the action was repeated on him. Struggling out of his mother's grip John smothered down his messed up hair with a huff and a glare.

"Mrs Brown." Harry greeted with a polite smile, picture perfect. "Been hooking up as of late?"

"Oh Harry," John was embarrassed to see his mother's face dusting over with a blazing blush. "You charmer there, no, I'm much too old for such business as you very well know. And I've told you before, it's Jessica." She fluttered her eyelashes as she invited them in.

"Thirty-five is hardly old Jessica." Harry said smoothly as he glided into the kitchen and waved her hands away before she could start on the tea and set off to do it himself. John sunk down in one of the empty kitchen chairs, wanting nothing more than to melt into a puddle of nothingness. "My godfather is thirty-six and he considers himself being in the prime of his years." He rummaged through the fridge and pulled out a half-eaten chocolate cake with a satisfied smile.

"Isn't your godfather Sirius Black?" Jessica asked curiously as she began cutting the cake.

"He is. How did you know?" Harry asked as he placed the cups down before them and filled them with warm water. A dash of sugar in both but only milk in John's and he slouched down with a package of apple juice that they kept exclusively for him.

"Young Ms Smith down the street has a crush on him and she did not like it pointed out that his godson would always come first. She's made it her mission to evict you from existence to claim his attention. Your name was mentioned at the last gossip meeting us females between." She winked cheekily.

"I take it I'm often a topic of choice?" Harry licked his tongue along the underside of his upper row of teeth in that peculiar way of his and smirked.

"Always."

John groaned. "Please, no flirting at the dining table." He mumbled miserably. His mom and Harry had the gall to laugh at him.

At first Harry hadn't taken notable interest in his mom other than a polite greeting and polite chatter but John had noticed his mom's sadness at Harry's standoffish attitude and had hesitantly taken it up with Harry. Harry had given him an unfathomable look but had upped his etiquette and a year and a half later they were readily make-John-as-embarrassed-as-possible partners.

But John would be kidding himself if he didn't say he enjoyed his mom's smiles which had become increasingly few since the death of his father and Anthony's imprisonment. She relied heavily on him and John leaned heavily on Harry. He didn't know where he'd been in life if it weren't for Harry.

He would never understand the almost brazen attitude of Harry's parents. James Potter's disappointed looks and Lily Potters pitying looks and evading eyes, as if Harry was something to be ashamed of. Harry's didn't get along particularly well with his twin brother Daniel either, but John put it down to the fact that since the age of eleven Daniel had spent his year around at some foreign school called "Hogwarts" and Harry would never answer to why he didn't go there when both of his parents and godparent and honorary uncle (John had only met Remus Lupin once but he seemed like a decent bloke) had all been going there.

It didn't make sense.

A smack of his head brought him out of his musings and John made to snap out in offence but the sharp eyes of his mother brought him up short and he settled for smiling sheepishly. "I'm with you?" He ventured hopefully.

Harry snorted into his package of apple juice.

"John." Jessica sighed and shook her head with a fond smile. "Harry was just telling me about your bravery. Apparently dove in to pick up a thing of his from a lake?" She asked for confirmation. John shot Harry a look and gained a smirk in return.

"I, well, yes." John scratched the back of his head. "But he-" John was smothered by his mother exclaiming in pride before he could finish and could do little more than trying not to choke.

"My dear darling brave boy." Jessica sighed happily and gave his cheek a wet kiss and patted it lightly. Blazing red John gave the smirking Harry the middle finger only to be promptly smacked for it.

Ace of Spades

"Mom?" Lily released Daniel from her hug and kissed his forehead fondly, patting his mess of black hair. "Where is Harry?" Dark brown eyes stared up at her seriously. Lily faltered and sighed and Daniel didn't like the look that shadowed her eyes. Had she always done that? Always looked like that?

"With John I would guess." Lily said lightly. "Up to no good." Harry had and always would be a sore topic in the Potter family for his lack of magic and Daniel wasn't surprised when his mom quickly changed topic. James arrived moments later and Daniel found his hair mussed up and bodily hauled into a manly hug.

Sirius and Remus grinned brightly at him and Daniel embraced his godfather and honorary uncle with gusto. "Padfoot, Moony, nice to see you old men." Sirius made a noise of protest.

"I'm thirty-six. Hardly old." Daniel ducked before he could be caught in a headlock and darted behind his godfather with a playful growl as Sirius made a swipe for him.

"You're old, decaying like a mummy. Every day is a new wrinkle and soon you'll be hunkered down and fighting to support yourself with a thin piece of wood." Daniel taunted, taking immense pleasure in the horror on Sirius face.

"Evil." Sirius breathed. "Prongs, control your son!" James made his laugh into a snorting cough, heedless to his best friend's withering glare. "Lily flower?" Sirius pleaded hopefully. The smirk in his direction said it all. Sirius sulked. "What about Harry then? Where is that little rascal anyway?" Sirius peered around but it was suspiciously empty of his smirking godson.

The guilty smiles on Lily and James were easy to spot and made Sirius frown but passed it quickly off with a teasing smile in Daniel's direction. "Off with that kid of his again I would guess? I swear if John was however involved in the wizard world he would've made an excellent Moony. Reluctant to prank but brilliant when involved."

"He's a muggle." James reminded him with a touch of bitterness.

Sirius waved it off. "Doesn't make it any less brilliant. You should hear the things he and Harry gets up to, it's astoundingly easy to wiggle little John into spilling his complains and I'll bet you anything

that adoring expression on his face the entire time will make you break into laughter. No matter how he complains it's easy to see that they're good for each other." Sirius said happily as grabbed hold on Daniel and Apparated. They landed smoothly before Godric's Hollow, Sirius holding a steady grip on Daniel to keep him from falling over.

"Are they close?" Daniel asked curiously. "Harry and John, I mean?"

"Almost like brothers. Harry saving John's life really made an impression on the kid and Harry made it his duty to protect him for reasons that yet evade me. But he made Harry open up and he in turn kept the kid from succumbing to his own problems. I don't know if it was instinctive but..." Sirius trailed off, catching sight of the topic of their discussion making his way down the street towards the house. "HARRY!"

Daniel whipped around, anxious to catch sight of his brother. If there was something Voldemort's resurrection at the Graveyard had taught him it was to keep your friends and family close. The realisation that he had Harry barely talked during summers and didn't exchange letters during the years came crashing down hard. Daniel couldn't even remember wishing Harry a happy birthday despite celebrating his party at home with Harry in the house.

They had drifted apart, all because Harry didn't have magic.

He had had a long talk with Hermione and been thoroughly smacked and then hugged for being a stubborn ass and through idiot. He couldn't blame her for it and he had resolved to make things right. He only hoped it wasn't too late. "Hey Harry!" Daniel called nervously as Harry got closer.

It was strange seeing Harry after a year apart. He'd spent Christmas at the Weasleys and Harry hadn't joined their parents when they came over, opting to spend it with John and his mother. Harry seemed to have grown taller but Daniel quickly perceived that they were roughly the same height. Harry had always had a slim wiry body which had only gotten more muscular with the years from whatever he did which added to his length. Daniel had overheard John calling Harry a monkey or ape in passing and could only guess.

They still shared the same black hair but Harry had Lily's eyes and Daniel James's and Daniel's shoulders were broader. Daniel hated the flittering surprise in Harry's eyes and his resolve strengthened.

"Siri, Daniel." Harry greeted with a cocky turn of his head. "Growing more wrinkly old man, and to think it was just a day since I last saw you." Harry dodged as Sirius swiped at him.

"What is this? Both prongslets ganging up on me." Sirius crossed his arms with a sulky huff.

Daniel caught Harry's eyes flickering in his directions and took the chance. "We're both noticing you're growing old, it can hardly be called ganging up. We're merely pointing out the facts. Right Harry?" Harry gave him an unreadable look that made Daniel falter for a second but Harry's smirk made him grin in turn.

"True, true. Old man is getting too senile to sort out the facts. Poor, poor Siri." Harry shook his head in mock sadness.

"You-you," Sirius looked at lost for words before he gathered himself together and pointed at them. "Just you wait. This old man can still sing-"

"Not literally."

"Not really." The brother's interrupted.

"You sing false."

"And Moony always spells the bathroom silent when you shower." Daniel concluded with an innocent smile.

"Moony does?" Sirius squawked in shock, his vengeance on his godson and honorary nephew forgotten. "But Moony always says I sing beautifully." Sirius pouted.

"He lies." Harry said easily.

"Liar, liar pants on fire." Daniel chimed happily.

"Oh I'll make that a literal statement." Sirius growled as he marched towards the house. "MOONY, COME HERE YOU TRAITOR!"

"It was only to spare your feelings!" Remus called loudly from the house.

"Remus is in so much trouble." Daniel said in glee. He turned towards Harry only to find that he was already making his way to the house. Daniel hurried up beside him. "We did that good, huh?" Harry cocked an eyebrow at him.

"So, what have you been up to today?" Daniel asked, desperate for a conversation as he followed Harry into the kitchen. His brother looked distinctively troubled by his persistence and turned towards him with suspicious eyes.

"What are you trying to pull, huh, Daniel? Trying to make a fool out of me by making friends and then mocking me for my desperation of being friends with the Boy Who Lived?" Harry hissed, grabbing hold of his shirt and twisting so that his fist rested beneath Daniel's chin and throat. Daniel fought down every instinct in him that demanded he pull his wand as he stared into his twin's eyes, fighting to catch his breath.

"I-I wanted to make up." Daniel wheezed. "I, the Graveyard... I realized I've been an ass. I just wanted everything to go back to what is once was." Harry sneered in disgust.

"You've been treating me like trash for years Daniel." Harry said, regarding him with dark eyes. "I will not allow you to treat me as if it never happened. I am not a naive child and while I don't hate you," he ignored Daniel's widening eyes, "I do not like you and I definitely do not trust you." Harry released him and Daniel stumbled backwards, clutching his throat as he gasped for breath. "Do not play games with me brother." Harry said and with one last dark look grabbed an apple and left the room.

Daniel sunk down in the closest kitchen chair feeling numb as he buried his face in his hands.

"It was obvious even to me, Daniel. The way your parents refuse to talk about him, the look in their eyes, the look in your eyes. I never said anything about it; I've never met Harry after all so I wasn't one to judge. But Daniel, you're telling me you've been treating your own brother like trash simply because he's lacking something I was only

lucky to be born with? Would you have hated me as well had I been a muggle and not a witch?"

Daniel trembled, recalling Hermione's words, his own vehement denial and the dawning realisation that had made an icy chill curl in the depths of his stomach. He knew it wouldn't be easy. Hermione had even said that it might be too late and that he was not to, under any circumstance, force Harry into accepting him.

"I don't hate you but I do not like you and I definitely do not trust you."

"It would've been easier if he hated me..." Daniel mumbled miserably. A hand settled gently on his shoulder and he jerked his head up to find the soft amber eyes of his godfather staring down at him with sympathy and understanding. "I take it you heard everything, huh?" Daniel asked miserably.

Remus sighed and grabbed a chair, sinking down on it so they were facing each other. "I've been such an ass, Moony." Daniel said forlornly. "Is there even a chance of fixing this?"

"I don't know but coming to terms with what you've been doing and apologizing properly is a start. Earning back Harry's trust is going to be hard, it's not something you can ask for. You'll just have to show him." Remus straightened. "I haven't been the best uncle to him either only Sirius-"

"Have been keeping the kid's sanity is check?" Sirius raised an eyebrow at them where he stood leaning in the door opening. "You have a lot to make up for but Harry is a good kid and he won't stay mad forever. He's not faultless in this mess either but he plays a lesser roll since he wasn't even given a chance to begin with." He noticed both their guilty eyes and sighed. "Look, I'm not trying to make you feel bad but I've been trying to straightening this mess for years without luck and with the anger I feel I can only imagine what Harry's feeling. Just be honest with him and try to engage him in conversation and activities and we might get something going." Sirius said honestly. "And with Voldemort on the move you're going to need all the support you can get."

"What about mom and dad?" Daniel asked, feeling lighter with a rising determination.

"Lily and James are an entirely different matter and I feel that Remy and I are going to have to sit down for a long talk with them in the future. But one thing at the time, eh?" Sirius winked.

Ace of Spades

"My brother is acting weird." John nearly fell out of the tree he had finally managed to brave in shock. Digging his nails into the bark he scrambled to righten himself on the thick branch, mouth agape in surprise as he stared at Harry who was dangling upside down from the canopy above by his knees.

"I, huh?" John said elegantly, completely thrown off. He could count the times Harry had willingly shared something personal about his life on six of ten fingers. "How weird?" John asked in interest.

"Weird, weird." Harry shrugged. "He keeps trying to engage me in conversations about his school and the like. Keeps asking about you as well." Harry flickered his eyes towards him with quirked half-smile.

"That's creepy." John said slowly. "And I mean really creepy. About me, really?"

"I think he's trying to make up for past behaviours." Harry vaulted down and John glowed in envy at the grace as Harry slouched out in the branch. Really, how could slouching look graceful?

"Is that so bad?" He asked hesitantly.

Harry didn't answers and it didn't take long before John started up on the latest gossip in town, mindless to the blank thoughtful look on Harry's face and the fact that his friend wasn't listening to a word he was saying.

A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.

Lessons in History

"Harry?" Lily peeked into the room of her oldest son and found him sprawled out on his bed with a book folded over his face, snoring softly. "Harry dear?" Flipping the switch she had to blink at the room was flooded with light.

It had been some time since she visited Harry's but it looked almost exactly as she remembered. The dark wooded bed with the yellow covers and matching yellow fluffy carpet. The walls were in dark green and apart from the bed there was a desk with chair, a bed table, wardrobe and bookshelf filled to the brim with books and Lily noticed absently that it was time to get him a new one as he'd begun to pile books on top of books. On the desk was a laptop charmed to work around magic, a lamp and a stone crown which Harry had adamantly refused to share the origins of. Beside the bed was a baseball bat and on the bed table was the silver watch they'd gotten him for Christmas and a dull golden spinning top.

"Harry, you need to wake up." She shook his shoulder and gained a groan in response. Lifting the book of his face Harry blinked blearily up at her with the same emerald green eyes she saw in the mirror each morning. She averted her eyes.

"Mom?" He asked sleepily. "What are you doing here?" His back and neck cracked as he stretched to release the kinks from his body as she sat up and the yellow covers pooled in his lap.

"I was wondering if you could help me with dinner. Alice and Frank are coming over, you remember the Longbottoms? They're bringing their son Neville as well and the Weasleys are already on their way." She said softly as he rubbed his eyes blearily.

"All of them?" Harry asked slowly as he dragged a hand through his messy black hair.

Lily shook her head. "Charlie is still in Romania but Bill has taken tomorrow off and they'll be staying for the night." Lily explained as Harry threw his covers off and stretched his hands over his head with a yawn.

"Molly, Arthur, Bill, Percy, Ron... Fred and George are the twins right?" Harry asked as he scratched his chin and tugged at his drawstrings pants.

"Yes. Ron is the same age as you and Daniel and Ginny a year younger." Lily handed him a black t-shirt which he obediently tugged on along with a pair of white socks. He had an entire drawer filled with white socks while Daniel had a drawer with black socks, for simplicity's sake.

"Siri and Remy coming as well?"

"Would you expect anything else?" Lily asked her son wryly.

Harry snorted. "Not really. You'd have to chain Siri to keep him away from here. Since dad gave him and Remy a room of their own he's been practically living here." Harry said dryly.

"And here I thought you were simply charmed by my company." Sirius said with humor as he appeared at the end of the stairs. "Nineteen guests to feed, I suggest you get it working. No doubt Molly will help you out, I know that woman all too well. The Weasleys are getting here in an hour but Frank doesn't get off until seven so they'll be here in roughly two hours." Sirius informed them as he shooed them brightly into the kitchen.

Being the only person in the house other than Lily who could cook anything edible Harry had picked up the necessary skills of cooking from early age after James and Sirius had nearly burnt down the kitchen making pasta. After befriending John he could also be found at the Browns helping out three or four times a week.

Putting on the pink apron Sirius had gotten him for his twelfth birthday Harry set to work under Lily's directions.

"And you must be Harry!" Harry stared blankly as the plump red-haired woman turned towards him with a beaming smile. "Such a handsome boy you are." She smiled kindly and Harry took her hand with a cordial smile.

"A pleasure to meet you Mrs Weasley." They had actually met before but that had been four years ago since Harry rarely mixed

with wizards or witches, spending most of his time in the muggle world.

"Oh call me Molly." She smiled kindly. "And this is my husband Arthur." She gestured for a kind faced, red haired man with balding hair. He had started to round a little, no surprise really, he had heard Daniel complain about the way Molly liked to fatten her subjects up.

"Fred and George." Twin red heads waved at him brightly and Harry cocked his head to the side with a smirk. They had an air of mischief and trickery about them.

"Ginny." A small red haired girl peered at him curiously and Harry took an immediate liking to her, oddly reminded of Rosy Rose three classes below him only something told him she wouldn't take a mouth lashing lying down...

"Percy." Harry took an immediate dislike to this particular Weasley who while not showing any obvious dislike had seen it flickering in his eyes. Tall and proud with a pinched dissatisfied air about him, as if he disapproved about the surrounding world. "You've hear of Ron of course."

Harry had. The best friend of his brother was tall with the same fiery red hair of the rest of his family and bright blue eyes peering out from a freckled face. "Lu." Ron nodded at him and Harry cocked his head to the side with a smirk.

"And Bill, my oldest. Charlie couldn't come, busy with those dragons of his..." She looked distinctively unimpressed by her second oldest son's chosen profession. Bill wore his red hair long and in a ponytail and in his ear was a earring with a fang dangling from it. He wore clothes that wouldn't have been out of place at a rock concert and what Harry perceived to be dragon hide boots. If John had been there he would've labeled Bill as 'cool'.

"Pleasure to meet you all. Mrs Weasley – sorry, Molly," he corrected himself at her look, "would you prefer to help out mom and me in the kitchen or stay here with the others?" He had already his hand offered and she took it with a smile.

"The kitchen, I would think, is the place for me." She allowed him to lead her into the kitchen where Lily was fighting to keep everything

in order. The two immediately set to help her and she smiled thankfully. After a moment she excused herself after a loud explosion sounded from the living room. "I didn't know you could cook. I don't believe Lily has ever mentioned it." Molly said after a while when Lily's rising voice had faded and Harry slipped past her, balancing the necessary items for a creamy sauce.

"It was a necessary skill, growing up." Harry said in amusement. "Mom refuses to let dad and Sirius near the kitchen anymore and Daniel has inherited dad's unfortunate skill of burning water." Harry explained as he checked the steak. "I'm good at it, not developing the skill further would've been a waste." Harry said with a shrug of his shoulders and a cheeky smile.

Molly laughed. "No modesty about your skill I hear." She dropped the tomatoes in the rest of the salad and set to blend it with a bit of olive oil and spice.

Harry cocked his head with an arrogant smile. "Whatever would the need be to hide what I'm good at?" Harry poured the water from the cooked potatoes. "The only thing my skill might inspire is envy and by all means, I can deal with that." Hands on his hips he peered at her intently. "I am proud of what I am and what I do; it's as simple as that."

She gave him a soft smile of understanding.

The table was soon set and the food done. The Longbottoms had arrived and Harry greeted them as they stepped into the kitchen.

Alice Longbottom was a kind round faced woman with short brown hair and kind eyes. Her husband Frank had curly black hair and intelligent dark eyes. He wasn't very tall but maneuvered himself smoothly. Their son Neville was a round faced boy with his mom's kind brown eyes and moved with slight hesitation to shake Harry's offered hand. Alice and Frank greeted him with smiles.

"This smells delicious." Sirius inhaled the smell of the food. "A killer combination of Lily, Molly and Harry's fabulous work. I'm officially in heaven."

"Behave old man." Harry smirked teasingly. "Save the drooling for your second form."

"Hear, hear." Fred said cheerfully from where he was sitting on Sirius left.

Sirius rolled his eyes, stopping mid-roll with a mischievous smile blossoming on his face. "Well, well. Oi, Moony? What would you say about this corner?" He gestured with his arms.

Remus who had been immersed in a conversation with Bill glanced over in bemusement. From his right were Fred, George, Sirius, Harry and James seated in a nice row. It dawned quickly and he smiled wryly. "Prankster corner."

Fred and George perked up and glanced at Harry in shrew interest. "You prank?" They asked in simulation, exchanging glances. "But it is said you have no magic?"

Harry cocked an eyebrow at them. "I don't need magic to prank someone. That is the wonder of my pranks. All I have is my hands and simple things such as hair coloring and little nifty things as lock picks and a shrew little box that contains just about anything I need to pull off a marvel of things." Harry gave them a shrew look. "I don't have a wand to change the hair color of my teachers' hair and that is what makes me the better prankster." Harry said arrogantly, taking a bite of an apple snatched from the fruit bowl.

The two was gaping at him. "You did not-"

"Just diss-"

"Our pranking skills." Fred finished in outrage.

"I did." Harry smiled smugly. "And I'll bet you anything you can't repeat half of the things I've done. Not without magic." He said slowly with an arrogant tilt of his head.

"Don't underestimate him." Sirius warned them. "I still can't believe half of the things he and his little minion get up to."

"I'm simply great and John can follow orders." Harry flipped the apple core at Sirius who caught it automatically with a grimace.

Fred and George exchanged glances. "Challenge accepted." They said solemnly. "How shall we prove our worth oh-master-of-muggle-pranks." Fred asked with a flourish bow of his head copied perfectly by his twin.

"I think John and Sirius can help us with that." Harry said slowly with a smirk. "Next Tuesday I'll take you to explore the muggle world and Sirius and John will issue a challenge. The one who pulls off the prank the best wins and gain the ever respect of the other partner. Sounds good, hm?"

"It's a deal." They nodded seriously.

"How good are your pranks, really?" Bill asked in interest.

Harry gave him a vain smile. "The best." He said simply and as far as he was concerned, that was the truth.

He dug into his fifth apple for the day and Sirius grimaced. "You shower in apple smell, eat at least four apples every day and your simply reek of apples. I don't get you." He declared seriously.

"An apple a day keeps the doctor away." Harry teased. "I believe I told you so when you lay sick in cold, and dragon pox, and during those vomiting spells of yours and oh, something about worms-" Harry caught the apple thrown at him. "Why thank you." He dug in with gusto.

Sirius glared at him.

Ace of Spades

"Why don't you kids go and play a game of Quidditch and leave us grown-ups to converse." Molly ushered everyone but Bill and Harry who was balancing precariously on his chair out of the room. Percy attempted to stay back as well but the twins hauled him with them. "Harry dear, won't you go to?" Molly asked curiously.

Harry shrugged. "I don't find Quidditch particularly interesting to watch."

"Except when it's the Norwegians." Sirius inserted smartly.

"Except when it's the Norwegians." Harry agreed easily.

Molly looked surprised before it dawned on her why Harry wouldn't, or couldn't for that part, play. "If that is what you wish." She said simply. Harry nodded his head and fished through his pockets to pull up his latest book. He had changed pants minutes before the Weasleys arrived and the large pockets of his cargo shorts allowed the pocket book plenty of space.

As the grown-up sunk into a discussion about Voldemort Bill turned towards Harry. "What are you reading?" The oldest Weasley child asked in interest.

"The Lucifer Effect by Philip Zimbardo." Harry switched the cover around.

"How good people turn evil?" Bill read curiously, eyebrows furrowing. "Muggle book?"

"Yes. It goes into detail about the Stanford Prison Experiment, the killings in Rwanda, the WWII and the leader Adolf Hitler among many things." Harry explained to the older boy. "As concerning the recent rebirth of Voldemort I find it interesting."

Bill nodded thoughtfully. "I heard about WWII, something about killing off a lot of people for being different...?"

Harry very nearly dropped his book in shock. "You don't know?" He demanded. "You don't learn about it in Hogwarts?" Perturbed by his reaction Bill shook his head.

Harry cursed. "Adolf Hitler can be likened with that of Voldemort." Harry said seriously. "Hitler was obsessed with the pureness of Germany and turned a whole country's hatred against the Jew despite being half himself. Voldemort is doing the same. A half-blood obsessed with blood purity and trying to extinct muggleborn and muggles." Harry explained patiently. "Over 60 million people were killed during WWII. Jews were the primary target but people were being put to death because they were handicapped or opposed Hitler's ideals. They were put in concentration camps where they worked themselves to death or huddled together, dirty and naked in small chambers where they were put to death by gas." Harry said in disgust. "Hitler concurred a large part of the world, how

do you not know this?" Harry demanded outraged. "It's one of the most important happenings in recent history."

Bill who had paled during his explanation could only shake his head. His mind shifted with images of death, barely able to imagine missing out on such a large happening.

"The magical world is always trying to separate from the muggles." Alice said softly. The grown-ups had stilled in favor of listening to Harry's voice which had been fierce with loathing. "The only thing our History classes contain is wizarding happenings and muggle studies are only optional. We don't learn because we chose not to."

"But the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima?" Harry grasped furiously. "The Cold War? The Vietnam war? The American Civil War? Surely you've heard about them?"

"I know because I grew up half in the muggle war." Lily said after a moment. "But there is nothing in the curriculum at Hogwarts that tells about any of that. We hear whispers of course, but the magical war never involves themselves with the muggle ones."

"We're safe behind spells that keep us from muggle detection." Remus said with a shake of his head. "It isn't consider it a need to participate in wars that have nothing to do with us since they don't participate in our wars."

Harry sunk back in his chair in shock and it clicked down on the floor. "That's insane." He shook his head numbly. "What is the worst that has happened in the muggle world other than Voldemort in the last hundred years or so?" He demanded.

"The war with Gellert Grindelwald. He was defeated fifty-years or so ago." Lily said thoughtfully. "And there was a rising Dark Lady hundred years or so ago before that in China I think."

"Lady Ching." Frank nodded his head in agreement.

"I'll bet you anything this is why wizards and witches have such a problem using Voldemort's name." Harry snarled. "Hitler did a lot more horrifying things on a greater scale but none in the muggle world fears his name." Harry said darkly. "The magical world is

upside down, the Ministry is a mess and you all shiver from head to toe at the sound of a name." Harry said in clear disgust. "We need to kick this game up or we'll be losing this time around. Daniel defeating him was just a lucky strike in the game."

"So what do you suggest we do?" Alice asked curiously as she studied the boy. She had heard about the squib brother of the boy-who-lived of course but this was the first time she had sat down and actually heard him speak instead of having him vanish out the door. While there was an arrogance about him she could read people well enough to perceive that he cared a lot even if he tried to hide it.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm fourteen, nearly fifteen. I don't know anything about this kind of things." He grimaced. "But as a caring brother I would suggest making something about Daniel's training or he'll turn up dead since Voldemort's been taking a special interest in him. I would guess you're already contacting allies and the Order."

"How do you know about the Order." James interrupted.

"I'm without magic, not deaf." Harry rolled his eyes heavenward. "The Order is currently being established as you just confirmed. Secondly you ought to get Hogwarts a proper Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. From what I've heard only Remus have been a good one and you're leaving your children defenseless in a war they'll be forced to participate in because Voldemort won't let them stand on the sidelines." Harry said seriously. "And trying to protect them from knowledge is only going to backfire so I suggest you at least inform them the gist of what's going on. With more knowledge they can hopefully keep themselves out of much trouble."

Silence reigned the kitchen. "But what do I know, I'm just a muggle. Now, if you excuse me I'll go to check on the others, I think I'm catching an argument breaking out..."

Ace of Spades

"I like the kid." Bill said after a moment as a door clicked shut upstairs. "And I think he got a point." He shot his mother a discreet glance, knowing how much she wanted to just hide them away until the end of the war.

"We should talk to Dumbledore as soon as possible." Sirius agreed, looking uncharacteristically grim. "And he was right about Daniel. With Quirrell, the Basilisk, Dragons, Merpeople and Voldemort training should've been considered earlier."

James sighed. "I suppose your right."

"And Harry? He'll be high targeted." Remus said softly.

"Give the kid a knife and I think he'll do fine." Bill said before Lily could open her mouth. "Just because he doesn't have magic doesn't mean he's defenseless." He caught the flicker of shame in Lily's eyes and his eyes sparked with suspicion.

"We can't just tell them everything about the war." Molly said sharply.

"But we can give them necessary information." Sirius said smoothly. "Knowing nothing will get them into more danger than knowing everything. Just enough to keep them satisfied and aware should do."

"But Ron and Ginny..."

"Have been in their share of dangerous situations." Lily said sympathetically. "I know what you feel Molly but I think he's got a point." Her eyes lowered, mind drifting towards the prophecy as her eyes darkened. "I don't like this but it'll have to be done."

"Perhaps opening a dueling club at Hogwarts?" Remus suggested.

Sirius lightened up. "Brilliant idea Moony! If we can just get a decent DADA teacher and a good Dueling teacher and the kids should be alright."

While the adults sat to plan an argument had went off between the kids outside and Fred was being held back by Daniel and George as he tried to lunge for Percy who was staring at him haughtily. "You take that back!" He demanded furiously. Save for Neville who shifted nervously in the background everyone was staring at Percy in blatant disgust.

"I won't." Percy said simply. "Dad will never become anything. He's weak and disgusting and he will never have the power I have in the Ministry."

"Do you know Voldemort's most famous quote?" Harry asked slowly with a screwed look, arms crossed over his chest as he came to halt a meter or so behind Percy.

"I don't." Percy snapped. "I don't study murderers."

"You should. It helps to keep you from becoming one." Harry said smartly. "And it keeps you from making big mistakes, in most cases at least." He buried his hands in his pockets and cocked an eyebrow, staring at him intently. "'There is no good or evil, only power and those too weak to seek it.'"

Percy recoiled as if struck and Harry's mouth stretched into a smirk. "Recognize it?"

"You don't know anything!" Percy said furiously and would've slammed his shoulder into Harry's when storming past him hadn't the younger boy simply leant out of his way.

"Pleasant bloke." Harry said dryly. "Makes my heart all warm and fuzzy." Harry switched his attention to the remaining teens. "Whose winning anyway?"

"We were." Ron said quickly.

"You were not!" Ginny snapped. "We were, just because we had that asshole on the team doesn't make you the automatic winning team." Harry caught the hint of triumphant in his brother's best friend's eyes and snorted in amusement as they started to bicker.

"Thanks." Daniel said softly. "He wouldn't shut up and I was moment from slugging him myself." He grimaced.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I find myself teaching History today." Harry said with a secretive smirk.

Ace of Spades

"It's a knife." Harry said slowly, staring at it. His dad looked distinctively uncomfortable as he shifted before him and Harry tilted his head to the side in interest. Thick and sturdy with a dull black blade to avoid reflection of light and a green handle. One side was sharp enough to prick his finger by simple touch while the back of it was jagged enough to saw with.

"An M9 bayonet." James dragged a hand through his black hair. "It's a survival knife. Bill suggested it; he said it was the best." Harry slipped it back into its black sheath and strapped it to his belt. "It's for protection, obviously. I mean, since you don't have magic..."

James looked distinctively uncomfortable and Harry stared up at the face of his father and smiled softly.

"Thank you." He said sincerely.

James jerked nervously and relieved smiled crookedly. "You're welcome son."

Ace of Spades

"And so begins the second war." Albus Dumbledore sighed softly in the lonesome of his office. The portraits of past headmasters and headmistress were in deep sleep but Fawkes crooned softly at him, buffing his red and yellow head against the aged wizard's chest, demanding to be scratched.

Albus chuckled softly as he did so and Fawkes trilled happily. "The Order has been called but we're few from the last time and with Fudge as Minister of Magic we're lacking the large support of the first war. He's already fighting to smother Voldemort's return over with lies. The year will be trying for young Daniel." He sighed regretfully.

Rain drizzled outside and Albus knew that he'd be forced to venture into the Forbidden Forest before the moon reached the highest point in the sky to converse with the Centaurs. They would not be happy with what he had to speak of but he needed them in the war.

"Too much has to be done in so little time." Fawkes trilled and smacked him reproachfully with his wing with accusing eyes.

"I know, I know." Albus chuckled. "I need to trust more and don't do everything on my own." Fawkes gave him an expectant look. "And I'm not the one who moves the chess pieces. Information needs to be shared and humans taken into consideration."

It was a well practiced speech between the two of them since after the last war when he'd nearly lost himself, only coming to the realization of his actions once Voldemort was gone. He'd fallen for the temptation of power again and a young boy and his family had very nearly lost their lives because he wanted to challenge Voldemort and the prophecy.

"And now I got my champion, my chosen one." His voice was bitter with self-loathing and the twinkle absent in his eyes. "But I can yet redeem myself my old friend." Fawkes trilled in agreement as he sat to rearrange his companion's long white beard.

"I'm getting old my dear friend." Albus sighed tiredly. "I fear I may not survive to see the end of this war."

Ace of Spades

"You're getting a tattoo?" John's couldn't quite wrestle down his disbelief and settled for gaping stupidly at his older friend. "Won't Mrs Potter kill you?"

"Most surely if she ever sees it." Harry said easily.

"As much as you wander about without shirt it would be a wonder if she didn't see it." John said smartly and Harry shot him a wry look.

"You make me sound like a stripper."

"You certainly strip enough to be one." John said dryly. He squawked when Harry hefted his right arm over his shoulder and with his body lined along the larger back a fluid tug of his arm and a duck sent him sailing over Harry's shoulder into the dam they'd been about to pass by. Birds squawked at him angrily as he spat out a mouthful of water and struggled to his feet.

"Whatever the hell was that for!" John swore as he tugged at his wet hair.

"For speaking the truth." Harry rolled his shoulders in a careless shrug.

John gaped. "I don't believe you!"

"Really?" Harry cocked an arrogant brow. "So you believe I did it for some other reason?"

"Your own pleasure!" John emptied his shoes while struggling to keep up with Harry who was moving with quick smooth prowling step towards the tattoo artist. "What are you getting anyway?" John tugged of his shirt with disgust and wrenched it, wrinkling his nose at the water that splashed to the ground.

A shirt collided with his head and one look confirmed its owner. Shirtless Harry raised an eyebrow, daring him to comment as she slouched with his hands in the dark blue cargo shorts he'd chosen for the day. "Your mom would kill me if you got sick."

"You don't need to stick it to someone else." John grumbled as he tugged it on. "So?"

Harry gave a shark like smile with all gleaming white teeth bared into an odd kind of smile that sent shivers down John's back. "An Ace of Spades."

Most of us can remember a time when a birthday - especially if it was one's own - brightened the world as if a second sun has risen.

Happy Birthday

"Happy Birthday!" John's eyes widened before a bright grin spread across his lips and he tackled Harry into a hug. Harry, balancing the bright pink package he brought with him awkwardly, hugged him back and as John released him Harry mussed up his hair affectionately. "Come one."

John tugged Harry inside, eyeing the package hungrily. Harry, noticing his eyes, let out a laugh and handed it over. Bouncing eagerly John frolicked into the kitchen where Jessica was making breakfast. She smiled softly and her eyes flickered with gratitude as Harry stepped inside. He nodded his head.

"Wow!" John let out a breath of awe. In his hand was a radio-controlled orange blue racing car with stubbed wheels for maximized speed. Turning it eagerly around he inspected each detail, noting his lucky number 52 painted in stylized bright pink familiar swipes. John glanced up at Harry a question on his tongue.

"I painted it myself." He shrugged his shoulders with a tilted grin. "I thought a bit of modification was in order and I know how much you love pink." John shook his head, grinning wildly. He loathed pink, Harry knew that very well, but if anything the bright pink numbers somehow made it even better, if that was even possible.

"I love it." He said without shame, hugging it close. Harry scratched the back of his head and grinned.

As it turned out the car was not the only thing Harry had in mind. Jessica waved them off and John found himself dragged to the Carnival. He wanted to protest but Harry had given him a firm look that made him give it up before even getting started. Instead he found himself enjoying himself with bright grins and breaths of awe.

He embarrassed himself by screaming as they reached the top of the Ferris wheel and Harry doubled over in laughter with John latched to his arm in terror as they tipped over the edge of the roller coaster.

He got to eat as much cotton candy as he wanted and Harry even allowed him to shoot with air guns and fly in the air born attraction. Night came too fast but the surprises hadn't come to an end and John found himself in a Japanese all-you-can-eat sushi restaurant.

John was in heaven and was still munching happily on a rice and salmon piece long after Harry had finished his twenty pieces. "This is the best birthday ever." John said, smiled. "Thank you." They were one of the few left in the steady emptying restaurant but the owners showed no signs of wanting them out.

Elbow on the table Harry used his hand to support his chin as he watched him in fond amusement. He shook his head. "I'm glad you liked it." He said sincerely. The candle light flickered on the white draped table and John leaned back with a satisfied hum. "Ready to go home?" Harry asked as he rose and tugged on his jacket.

He had dressed in dark loose jeans and white t-shirt for the evening and the jacket was his ever present G-Star black jacket. Harry had been wearing the same jacket for as long as John had known him and wondered how in the world Harry still fitted in it. He had once suspected Harry simply ordered the same jacket but sizes bigger but there were small scratches and a pink spot at the inside collar that always stayed.

He put it down on the list of many strange things that concerned Harry James Potter.

"I doubt nothing more could make this day more perfect." John grabbed hold on the offered hand and allowed Harry to pull him to his feet. John had dressed in his best jeans and a light blue sweater and he shrugged his dark blue jacket over it.

John managed to drag Harry into a conversation about the greatness of dachshunds (he'd had an obsession with them for years). Harry found the tiny yipping dogs annoying and argued that the stubborn nature of the Rottweiler was much more preferable, but John wouldn't fold his cards.

He was in the middle of describing the beauty of the small dogs when Harry came to a sudden halt and John was surprised to find himself outside his house. "There is actually one last gift." Had Harry been any one else he would've shifted in embarrassment at the look

John sent him but Harry's smile merely widened into a smirk. "It's a tie between your mother and I so don't go blame this entirely on me."

Harry's eyes flickered towards the kitchen windows and Jessica winked cheekily at him before disappearing from view. A second later and the door latch clicked open and tiny dachshund puppy came darting out on small stubby legs, yapping wildly with its tiny tail swinging furiously. It was black and brown with large ears that flopped happily.

John met it half way and lifted it carefully into his arms with all the awe and admiration of someone who had just found their second half. "It's male. I wanted to name him Sausage but Jessica was all for letting you name him yourself." He rubbed the back of his head and shot the smirking woman a glare.

"I think I'll call him Harryo." John said. He cooed, rubbing his nose against 'Harryo's' nose, ignoring Harry's spluttered words of protest.

All in all it was the best birthday in his life and John clung tightly to Harry's waist as they shared his tiny bed. The lumpy extra bed had been abandoned on the floor and John curled closer, breathing in the musky sent that was solely Harry while listening to the calm heartbeats below him. And as he drifted off to sleep, feeling Harry's long fingers gently stroking through his short hair John smiled. "You're the best big brother in the world, Harry." John admitted in a whisper. "I'm so glad I met you."

Harry stilled beneath him and Johns breath caught, afraid that he overstepped some boundary but Harry resumed his previous action and it was all John needed. Closing his eyes he fell into deep sleep under the careful ministrations of his big brother in all but blood with Harryo curled at the foot of the bed and felt that life was good and everything would be alright as long as he had his Harry.

Ace of Spades

Daniel walked into Harry's room the day before his and Harry's fifteenth birthday and very nearly tripped over his feet in surprise. He had to close his eyes, rub them and open them again to make sure what he was seeing was, in fact, true and that, yes, Harry was indeed sitting on his bed knitting.

"Don't you know how to knock?" Harry asked dryly as he moved the metal sticks with a nimbleness that could only be from years of expertise.

"So, uh, how long have you been you know...knitting?" Daniel pretended the slight hitch and squeak in his voice hadn't been there as he awkwardly sunk down beside Harry on the bed.

Harry rolled his eyes heavenward in exasperation. "Since I was ten. I find it to be a... beneficial... skill."

"I see." Daniel said slowly, not understanding at all how knitting could be a beneficial skill but nodding all the same. Silence settled between them and Daniel fiddled awkwardly with the hem of his sleeve. "So is John coming tomorrow?"

Harry gave an exasperated sigh and put his knitting down in favor of leveling him with a stare. "What do you want Daniel?"

"Ah, oh well- erm," Daniel fumbled for words, his cheeks dusting over with pink. "I was just wondering... just wondering..."

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"?" He said very quickly, holding his breath. Harry stared before abruptly bursting into amused laughter. "Oi! Shut up! It's not funny Harry!" Daniel flailed furiously, beetroot red at his brother's reaction.

Ace of Spades

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" The crowd of people shouted happily. The Weasleys and Longbottoms and even Luna Lovegood and Hermione Granger were there. Daniel and Harry had been forced into wearing ridiculous neon pink hats with fluffy rims and ball on top which Harry had managed to pull off with a fashionable tilt to the side and was looking quite content while Daniel itched to tear his off with clawed fingers.

Daniel found himself tacked by a beaming Hermione and hugged her just as tightly back before being drawn into a manly hug by a laughing Ron.

Harry was beckoned by Sirius. He hadn't been allowed to invite John since there would be magical presents and activities and Sirius engaged him happily in an eager conversation about the beauty of dogs. The dog animagus was practically reeking smugness and Harry smiled wickedly as he trolled his way through the conversation.

He was soon assaulted by the Weasley twins who had taken a charm to him after their bet (John and Sirius had decided on a rather basic muggle prank; change the color of a chosen person's hair, shave off their eyebrows and leave a signature of sort somewhere on their skin. They also had to paint the person's shoes and steal a piece of clothing and all this had to be made in public) which Harry had won with a bit of finesse. The twins had ended up scrambling to get away from the young woman they had chosen as their target. Apparently she was fashion obsessed and everything she wore very expensive and she hadn't appreciated their tries to fancy her up.

"O our wonderful Master-" George said solemnly.

"How wonderful it be that you graze us with your presence." Fred and George bowed so low their foreheads nearly touched the ground as they pretended to gravel at his presence. Harry smirked. As the winner he'd decided the prize and Fred and George would be calling him Master for a year.

He wasn't ashamed to admit he got a kick out of it.

A present showed into his face made him blink. "Open it Master."

"Yes open it." George and Fred smiled wickedly.

Prying the yellow paper open Harry gave a snort of laughter. It was a black dog collar with a silver nametag for dogs with 'Master' engraved on it.

"To make it official, you know." George said mischievously.

"Hear, hear." Fred winked before they both vanished in search for Ron.

Sirius choked on laughter as Harry proudly clicked it in place and with an arrogant swagger flipped him off to join the snacks table.

"So that's your brother." Hermione said curiously, her brown eyes trailing her friend's look alike with keen intelligence. From what she could see Harry was more muscular than Daniel who had broader shoulders. She supposed it came from the fact that he still had P.E in school while the most exercise wizards and witches partake in was Quidditch. He looked like someone who enjoyed sports and probably swam, judging by the lean and wired body instead of the bulging muscles of someone who worked out with weights and if anything he ran. Soccer, if she had to take a guess. And she'd heard Daniel mention something about baseball.

But they had the same jet black hair and their faces are nearly identical with small differences, most noticeable the color of their eyes; topaz and emerald and Harry's hair is more wild and his skin slightly darker. And then there is the scar on Daniel's forehead, the lightning bolt that signified his survival of the death curse.

"You-"

"Look a lot alike?" Daniel said in amusement.

Hermione frowned and shook her head. "There are many differences." She tore her eyes away from Harry. "But I suppose if you look at the whole picture you share many similarities." She admitted.

"But I'm obviously the more handsome twin, yes?" Harry appeared by her side with a teasing smile. Hermione startled and her eyes widened in surprise. She hadn't heard him at all and her eyes flickered towards where she'd last seen him.

"Harry!" Daniel brightened. "Meet Hermione Granger, one of my best friends." Harry cocked an eyebrow at her as she slowly turned her attention back to him.

"Pleasure, I've heard a lot about you." Her eyes flickered towards the dog collar around his neck and she had to bite down on her lips to keep from smiling.

"Only good I hope." She said politely.

Harry shot a smirk at Daniel. "Ah yes, I've heard so many things about this bushy haired manic that put the horrifaction of being

expelled before death and apparently plots in secret to take over the world with homework." Harry drawled with a flick of his green eyes to Daniel who had paled dramatically and staggered backwards nervously as Hermione rounded on him.

"I didn't put it quite that way." Daniel stammered. "I mean, not that I said anything at all – it's Sirius! Yes, Sirius! I promise!"

Harry's godfather who had been lumbering past stopped to gape at him. "I did so not!" Sirius protested. "It's all little Prongslet." He huffed.

Hermione glared at Daniel who whimpered.

Present opening were a load of fun. Harry's pile was smaller but as it was they were all Daniel's friends and it hardly bothered him. The strange earring from the even odder girl Luna Lovegood came as a surprise thought and he tilts his head to the side as he studies her keenly.

She had straggly dirty blonde hair and protuberant silvery grey eyes which seemed to be dreamily distracted with feint eyebrows above them. She was slim with a budding body and Harry guessed she was a year or so younger than him. Her wand is tucked behind her ear and a butterbeer necklace around her neck and beetroot earrings in her ears. Her eyes flickered in his direction and she smiled serenely. "Do you like it?" She tilted her head to the side.

Harry switched his attention back down to the happily smiling monkey with wings and long curly tail and smiles. "I do." And the smile that she gives him is enough to keep him from mentioning the fact that he hasn't any holes in his ears. But, he suspects as the girl's dreamy eyes stare at seemingly nothing, she probably she already knows that and doesn't care. The monkey's never ending wide smile earns a sharp one in return.

His parents had bought him a lesson certificate for motorcycle driving (probably since he couldn't use floo or portkeys and needed a way of getting around) along with a hefty sum to buy himself his very own motorcycle, and a good one at that ("We would've gotten you one in hand but Sirius looked ready to strangle us" James said sheepishly). Daniel on the other hand received his own whole new Firebolt, the best broom on the market and its expense could

probably outdo the cost of his bike. It was a staggering thought and Daniel caressed it carefully in awe.

Remus had gotten him a lockpicking jackknife with a cheeky wink and a bottle of something shimmering golden that he claimed to be 'Felix Felicis' had Daniel stammering in awe as he clutched it carefully.

From Daniel Harry got a skateboard (his last one had been cracked in half just a week before) with a Slytherin snake on the underside which got him a cocked eyebrow and a smirk which Daniel merely stuck his tongue out in response.

It was finally Sirius present and if the black collar that matched his own perfectly only it had 'Lupa' engraved wasn't enough sign he found himself beckoned up to his own room where Sirius cracked the door open and shooed him inside.

Harry found himself smiling softly, a rare thing for him to do, as a tiny Rottweiler puppy yipped and wagged her tail happily and Harry had her up and cradled against his chest in seconds.

Sirius watched him with fond but sad eyes. "It's a tie gift between that kid John of yours and me. I named her Lupa but if you want to change it..."

Harry turned and smiled such a sincere smile that Sirius momentarily found his breath caught in his throat. He couldn't remember the last time Harry had given him such a rare and open expression.

"She's perfect." Harry said softly, kissing the tiny pups head. "Thanks Siri."

Sirius agreed whole heartedly and his beaming smile wouldn't come off for the entire duration of the day. "You're welcome pup."

Ace of Spades

"Well, at least they aren't killing each other." John said puzzled as the tiny Dachshund had the Rottweiler clambering to her owner in terror. Harry who had been wearing his jacket as usual dragged the

zipper down to the middle and dropped Lupa inside, allowing her tiny head to peek over the zipper, safely away from Harryo.

"Optimistic." Harry said dryly as he scratched Lupa behind her ears. She was wearing the collar which had been charmed by Sirius to grow as she aged.

John coughed to hide his snickers at the soft expression that took over the normally distant Harry Potter as he gazed down at the small puppy and John felt insanely smug; he knew Lupa would be the perfect present. Of course, he wouldn't have been able to pull it off without Harry's godfather who John after much planning had managed to rein in to share his plan with. Sirius had been very enthusiastic.

The fact that they were wearing matching collars only added to John's amusement.

Harryo barked happily and tugged at his leash which slipped out of John's hand in surprise. John laughed and chased after the Dachshund as it took off after a flock of birds on tiny stubby legs that gained surprising speed.

John managed to tackle the puppy with a triumphant "Hah!" and proudly made his way back with a furiously wagging Harryo.

"Hey, Harry!" Harry cocked his head to the side in confusion as a flustered Daniel came jogging over, peering at John who had tightened his hold on Harryo and was glaring at him suspiciously. "So, uh, this is John?" Daniel said unsurely.

John could hardly believe Harry and this other boy was related, the way they acted was complete opposite. Harry would never look so flustered and nervous and Harry would never fiddle with the hem of his shirt in that awkward way.

John inched closer to Harry who rolled his eyes heavenward in exasperation. "Yes, this is John. John, meet Daniel." Daniel offered his hand but John didn't take it, opting instead for narrowing his eyes further.

"Oh, well hi." Daniel let his hand fall and stuffed it in his pockets.

Harry had dark jeans that sat just right and a white t-shirt with his black G-Star jacket over it, zipped up just enough to allow Lupa to peek out at her surroundings. The dog collar hung around his neck and the golden monkey from Luna smiled widely from his left ear.

Daniel was wearing long light jeans, a black jumper and a red jacket with a roaring golden lion on the back of it. A chain necklace hung around his neck (his birthday gift from Harry) and scruffy sneakers.

John's mouth curled as he surveyed the other. Daniel didn't look like Harry. Daniel wasn't Harry. "Why are you here?" John snapped in annoyance, angry that this boy was trying to steal his big brother's attention.

Daniel looked taken aback and his eyes narrowed.

Harry on the other hand shot them a bored look before slumping down on the grass and fishing forth a bag of snacks to Lupa's enthusiastic delight and he had her rolling in circles under the envious watch of Harryo trapped in John's arms.

"It's not illegal for me to surprise my big brother with a visit." Daniel bit out sharply but quietly so that Harry wouldn't hear him.

"You can spend time with him when he's home. He promised to spend the day with me and you aren't welcome." John hissed, glaring up at the taller boy.

"I brought him apple." Daniel rolled a lush red apple in his hands.

"He's not a dog." John rolled his eyes.

"But he's got a collar." Daniel said triumphantly. It took a second for his words to sink in before they both snorted in amusement and glanced over at Harry who shot them a suspicious glance. Daniel offered his hand a second time, more surely than the first. "Daniel Sirius Potter."

John took it after a momentarily debate with himself. "John Lyall Brown." He said slowly as he shook the others hand. "And Harry's my big brother too, so don't try anything." He narrowed his eyes warningly before Harryo's struggles became too much for him and

he let the small Dachshund down. The leash was the only thing that prevented the tiny dog from lunging for Lupa.

Daniel felt a pang in his chest but shook it away as he smiled shakily. "I wouldn't dream of it."

Harry had half in mind that he'd died and went to heaven. When John claimed he wanted to show him something he hadn't expected anything like this.

Mary Louise's Apple Paradise

The shop was small and hidden away and the sign outside as old and wrinkled as the kindly smiling lady that greeted them shakily as they stepped inside. Apples of every kind lined baskets upon rows and rows and Harry had to struggle not to actually drool his unshakable façade broken by this wonderful paradise.

"You couldn't have chosen a more accurate name for your shop ma'am." Harry shook his head with a smirk.

"Mary please." The lady breathed, her white hair as wispy as white cotton candy on her head and her eyes dark yet bright in her face as she smiled kindly.

"Mary." Harry bowed his head slightly to kiss the back of her hand. "You can call me Harry." Both Daniel and John noted her pink tinted cheeks in amusement.

Harry spent a good hour exploring the shop and asking Mary about all the different kinds of apples and the two ended up slicing up different kinds to taste and discuss. It was like visiting the Minister of Magic, Daniel thought with a yawn, but insanely more boring. John had slumped down by the door and reading a book he had stolen from Harry's pocket while petting Harryo who lay sprawled out and snoring in his lap.

Lupa was happily nibbling on the small pieces of apple Harry was feeding her and Daniel could only imagine what that would develop into in the future.

Harry ended up buying a bag filled with twenty-five different kinds of apples he'd never even heard of before and thanked Mary warmly

with a kiss to her cheek, much to Daniel's and John's shock and the two were still gaping at him when the door clicked shut and he vanished out of sight.

"Such a wonderful boy." Mary breathed as she gently lowered her body into her rocking chair. "Tell him he's welcome to visit me any time he wants."

Daniel and John had no such plans and escaped without even a goodbye.

"How did you find that shop anyway?" Daniel asked as they trailed after a very much content Harry who seemed happy to ignore him for the time being as he talked lowly with Lupa.

"Stumbled upon it by accident." John grimaced. "I figured Harry would like it."

"Like?" Daniel snorted. "More like obsess. I remember when we were small, I think we were six or seven, and mom forgot to buy apples. Harry very nearly exploded and when mom said he'd had to wait for the next day to get his night apple since it was too late he ran out of the house. He didn't appear until four o'clock, dirty from head to toe and scrapes and bruises and clutching a handful of apples." Daniel shook his head with a grin. "Mom never forgot to buy apples after that."

John laughed. "Sounds like Harry." He said between muffled snickers.

"So how did you meet Harry anyway?" Daniel asked curiously.

John's eyes shadowed. "He saved my life." Daniel had heard about it but not any details. All he knew was that he'd been called home from school to find Harry shot and unconscious in the hospital and no one would explain what had happened. When he'd finally returned to school it was to find Hermione petrified and he'd been too caught up in his own worries to ask Harry once summer came around. And they had been drifting apart long before then and Harry had hardly been top priority.

His big brother had nearly died and he hadn't been top priority. Daniel felt vaguely disgusted by himself, remembering his brief

hasty greeting at the sight of Harry finally awake and home before he was darting through the floo network to the Weasleys and Harry's faded voice in the background was none of his concern.

I was only twelve... Daniel couldn't help but think. But so was Harry... He wondered what Harry had been attempting to say. Perhaps asking if he was alright...? The Phoenix tears had healed him but the scar reminded and his parents surely told Harry... Did he worry about me? Daniel thought curiously as he studied his twin's back. If he could give his life for a stranger surely he worried about his own brother...?

"What are you thinking about?" Daniel glanced down at the younger boy with shaggy blonde hair and dark blue eyes and the cocked eyebrow that reminded him so of Harry and the freckled face that made him think of Ron.

"And Harry's my big brother too, so don't try anything."

"Just thinking." Daniel shrugged his shoulders in such an eerie imitation of Harry that John had to refrain from gaping.

Huffing John crossed his arms over his chest with a stubborn tilt of his head. "I don't like you but I'll try for Harry's sake." Daniel's mouth twitched and he messed up the younger boy's hair which earned him a muffled curse.

"Lay off the hair! That's Harry's property!" John scowled.

Harry blinked. "It is?" He asked in bemusement. John turned twelve shades of red and stammered out his denial while Daniel doubled over in laughter.

I think I understand you just a little bit better 'Ari...

Ace of Spades

James dreamt of Daniel and Harry.

Harry stood proud and tall with hungry gleaming red eyes as Daniel writhed at his feet with wide blue eyes and he kept begging and pleading but Harry wouldn't stop and then Harry's skin kept turning lighter and lighter and the hair fell from his head and his place stood

Voldemort with his wand raised and he was torturing Daniel and blood dripped from above and when James looked up the dead green eyes of his oldest son look down at him in accusation where he hang pitifully from a snare that stretched down from the heavens.

And then the dream changed and James found himself staring down at a tiny toddler with the same green eyes of his wife and shame and disappointment snapped through him with the force of a whip. "You're a squib." And he remembered the loathing in his voice and the hurt and confusion in the tiny two year olds eyes seconds before Harry burst into tears and James, instead of comforting him like he always had, turned around and left with the screams of his son ringing pitifully through his head...

And then the dream was changing again and Harry was walking away from him headless to his calls...

James awoke with a start, drenched in sweat but rolling around he soon fell back to sleep and when he awoke the next morning he couldn't remember the dream at all.

A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.

My Hero

John wasn't surprised to find Harry navigating his newly bought motorcycle with ease on his second lesson. John was one of the few who knew that Harry could already drive a car and had been teaching him at a car dealer place owned by a shockingly neat looking man for such a business named Jonah and only Jonah and always greeted them with an apple and a bottle of strawberry jam that he was convinced John adored.

Apparently Jonah owned Harry and had taught him how to drive and now helped Harry teaching him the very same lesson. He was a very enthusiastic guy and good and what he did and it wasn't very surprising that Harry used the gift certificate for driving lessons at Jonah's after buying his bike off him.

It was a bedraggled thing, black but strong and fast and Jonah had been trimming it personally so it was a good catch and Harry probably got it for a lot less than it was worth. But that was the great thing about Jonah and it was damn near impossible not to like the man. He had a way with words that wasn't unlike Harry when he put his mind to it. John shifted, feeling clammy and disgusting and cold despite his extra laying of clothing.

Harry could damn near charm the panties of any lady if he wanted to, an ability that John envied him greatly for but Harry very rarely put it to use. As it was Harry seemed pretty oblivious to girls, able to charm them but never taking it a step further. He had just started noticing the beauty of girls himself but they hardly spared him a second glance when Harry was with him. He had dared to mention it to Harry who had poked him fondly with his middle and index finger on his forehead before messing up his hair. "It will come, John, don't be too hasty with growing up." John's throat itched as he huffed in annoyance and his head felt stuffy and cloudy.

Don't be too hasty... Hah! As if he was hasty on wanting to grow up, be just like Harry one day and charm the panties of the most beautiful woman in the world and she would be his... Alright, a bit hasty perhaps but Harry made sure to remind him that he was a kid

and that kids were allowed to do a lot of things that grown-ups weren't allowed to do.

So John resigned himself to his fate... at the moment. Still, he thought as his eyes followed the beautiful hips of a brunette with an almost hypnotic trance without his exclusive permission, there was nothing looking. Kids are allowed to do that...

"Dubious." Harry said amused and John startled, not even having realized Harry had come to a skidding halt beside him with the bike and had just tugged his helmet off.

"What do you mean?" John asked as his eyes without permission sneaked back to her as Jonah slid up beside her with that enthralling smile of his. John sighed. A true beauty with dark chestnut hair and eyes that brought his mind to frosty ice...

Harry snorted in amusement. "Nothing, nothing. You keep up that ogling of yours. I'm done for the day and Jonah has fixed all necessary papers and I'll be getting my driver's license somewhere next week – Jonah promised to notify me through a text message."

John hummed. Any normal person would've been called through the home phone since Jonah found text messages dubiously volatile but not the Potter family. They didn't even own a home phone and only Harry owned a mobile phone and that only since a year or so back when John had gotten tired of walking to the Potter mansion each time he needed to speak with Harry.

The problem with Harry was that he rarely answered when the phone rang. Messages on the other hand... He'd been muttering something about hearing voices when John had asked why he didn't pick up when it rang and the dubious answer had refrained him from asking further questions. Sometimes Harry was just Harry and forcing Harry into anything was very much impossible.

He humored people, complied with boredom, didn't bother fighting it but it was always on his conditions and he always kept the option of simply walking away very much open. John knew only one exception to that rule and it had left him terrified down to his very bones.

Feeling suddenly chilled John was very much relieved to wrap his arms around Harry with his very own helmet propped on his head and hadn't it been for Harry he probably would've fallen off some the bike some twenty minutes later and Harry used his sweater to tie his arms steady around his middle. The last thing he remembered was Harry's warm green eyes peering down at him with an eyebrow cocked in was that slight worry...? John's world drowned quickly in black and he fell asleep, feeling stuffy and clammy and feverish and so, so very tired.

Harry looped the younger boy into his arms and carried him into the Potter mansion. Jessica would be away for another week on business with her work and Harry had been opted for John's guardian meanwhile. He was supposed to stay at their house but John might call him a jack-of-trades but healing was not a skill Harry had picked up. Yet.

He felt John's burning forehead and put it at top priority for the future.

None of the adults were home but Daniel opened the door curiously when he rang it and Harry could see Hermione and Ron seated at the dining table.

Daniel's face morphed into immediate worry. "What's wrong with him?" He asked as he opened the door wider to allow him inside.

"Fever and a wheeze in his breath that has only deepened. A common cold I would guess." Harry said as he carried John up the stairs. Slightly put off Daniel hurried after him and naturally Hermione and Ron followed curiously. Catching his brother's intention Daniel crossed Harry's room on quick feet and pulled back the covers so that Harry could lay John down. Daniel smothered the envy that welled inside him as Harry gently tucked him in.

"You need to keep him warm." Hermione said as Harry spun around to find himself eye to eye with intelligent eyes that made him think of rich dark chocolate. "His throat will hurt when he awakes and some chicken soup should do him good." She tilted her head to the side. "I would suggest bringing some tissue as well."

Harry flashed her a thankful smile.

The golden trio had been pouring over their research when Harry came carrying John and Hermione had to smack Ron and Daniel both to keep their attention from striving towards the humming Harry Potter in the kitchen, pink apron in place as he moved smoothly.

Hermione wouldn't admit it to anyone but her attention strived as well and found a tiny smile curling her lips as she watched him work. It was kind of endearing to watch him and it was so unlike everything she had come to expect of him from the few snips and pieces she'd heard from Daniel. Of course it had also made apparent that they hadn't been very close and if the tales were anything to go by Harry was probably more relaxed around them, or just caught up in his worry.

Forcing herself to concentrate on the books in her lap she poured over the information.

Ron hardly lacked her drive and found it boring to begin with. Daniel had it easier but he was clearly curious and envious, if Ron read him correctly, about Harry and John.

Ron who came from a large family with many brothers and a little sister had never understood the distance between Daniel and Harry. He had always had the distinct feeling that it had something to do with Harry's lack of magic and it had always befuddled him how they seemed to have chosen magic before family but there was obviously something more involved but Ron couldn't figure what.

He had listened to Daniel complain about his strange twin, though, all the boys in the newly turned fifth year boys had. How strange he was, how popular and standoffish and how he always kept people at a distance, as if they weren't worth his attention...

Ron would never claim to be especially good at reading people but he admitted that some of it made sense, at least to a degree from what he had seen. Yes, Harry was standoffish but only to certain people such as Percy and his dad while he seemed to have taken a shine to Bill and Loony Lovegood (which he would never understand) and seemed to enjoy teasing Hermione and recently he was actually talking to Daniel who had told them about their first summer encounter (Ron, doubled over in laughter, could only say he deserved it - had Malfoy done the same to him he would've slugged him).

Ron didn't think that Harry was a bad person but strange and with too many secrets and too many depths, yes. Ron admitted without hard feelings that he didn't trust Harry and Harry didn't seem to trust anyone but John.

"What are you researching?" Hermione jumped in surprise but Daniel and Ron had been watching him since he entered the room. Harry plopped down beside Hermione, a hint of tiredness visible and Daniel glanced at the watch, realizing with a grimace that Harry had been focusing all his care on John for the last four hours.

"You wouldn't understand it." Hermione smacked Ron who cried out and rubbed his head with a glare but wisely kept his mouth shut after a warning look from Hermione that reminded him of his mum. Both were equally as scary as far as he was concerned.

"How do you know that?" Harry asked with a tilt of his head.

"We're researching spells." Hermione explained as she fingered the heap of parchments.

"Since the war is starting..." Daniel said and a dark look flashed in his eyes. "I couldn't do anything against Voldemort; I need to learn how to defend myself."

"We all do." Hermione said, laying a gentle hand on Daniel's shoulder and squeezing.

A strange unreadable look crossed Harry's face and he hummed as he leaned back in the couch. "Offensive or defensive?" The three exchanged looks but Hermione's intelligent mind quickly caught what he was doing.

"Mostly focused on defensive but-"

"You're sorting through the offensive ones that can be used both to flee and in battle." Harry said knowingly. Hermione nodded, caught by surprise. "Trickster spells? Making someone temporarily blind and then a tripping jinx? Summoning spells to block incoming spells such as the Unforgivables?"

"Yes, I was thinking about that." Hermione said eagerly as she dug through the heap of parchment to pull one forth eagerly. "There is a spell called Obscuro that blindfolds someone."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "Good, but should you be chased by more than one Death Eater a bright light might serve you better." Harry advised. "Like Lumos but much stronger. It is supposed to be good against undead creatures as well."

"And you know that how?" Daniel asked in amusement as Hermione eagerly scratched down his suggestion, her mind going a mile a minute.

"I read fantasy." Harry said with such honesty that Daniel's face flat lined.

"About the summoning charm Accio..." Hermione said eagerly as she showed her notes under Harry's nose and began to talk eagerly while Harry nodded seriously and pointed out his own suggestions as she paused to take her breaths and Daniel listened in surprise, hardly able to keep up as Harry began outlining his own long suggestions that apparently made sense to Hermione but went right over his head.

Daniel thought Ron summoned it up very nicely: "Bloody hell there's two of them."

Ace of Spades

Harry had managed to coax John into a deep sleep by the time the adults arrived home and he was forced to explain the situation. And such all magical activity had been banned for the time being, to James and Sirius chagrin as they couldn't retaliate when they found themselves with faces painted by permanent markers and Harry wouldn't stop smirking at the sight of them.

John was up at lunch the second day and was a bit overwhelmed at truly meeting the entire Potter family while coughing and sniffing miserably. The only one he had really spoken to other than Harry was Daniel and Sirius and he'd only seen James and Lily from time to time when they'd been accompanying Harry or picking him up from school or the like.

It was a bit unnerving and John was relieved to find himself tucked into bed by Harry who had even managed to beg himself a loud reading from Harry whose cheeks tinted ever so slightly red as he settled down. John enjoyed every second of it and drifted off to the comforting voice of his big brother in everything but blood.

The third day Lily was forced to spell John asleep after the Order was called for a meeting at Potter mansion which had been chosen as temporary hideout and no matter how much Harry protested and glared he found to his loathing cradling and unresponsive John and refused to come down for the entire duration of Order meeting and wouldn't speak with anyone when he came down to make himself a bowl of soup, the restoration left in the fridge for John's breakfast.

Both Daniel and Hermione had also been notable put off by what the adults claimed was necessary although Sirius looked highly uncomfortable by the glares his godson kept sending him.

Harry remained vigilant over John's bed the entire night and no one dared to comment on the deep bags beneath his eyes as he gently lowered John into one of the kitchen chairs. The groggy boy had to be fed by a gently crooning Harry, barely able to keep his eyes open. Spells weren't meant to be used on muggles, it could have unforeseen side effects and Harry wouldn't be forgiving them any time soon.

As soon as John was healthy enough to be moved Harry had taken him back and he didn't return home until six days later. He still refused to speak with anyone other than Daniel and Hermione and to an extent Ron and vanished out early in the morning to return late night.

After much begging from Sirius Bill had taken the evening off and he stepped out of the fire place, looking highly perturbed. "What is it?" He asked sharply as he caught sight of Sirius miserable and nervous face.

And so Bill found himself in the emptied Potter mansion with a wished good luck as the others flocked over to the Weasleys. He was a bit surprised they had decided to contact him but from what Sirius said Harry didn't have a lot of people he trusted, only John and to an extent Sirius who seemed to have crushed it in allowing them to put the kid's best friend to sleep.

Muggle best friend. Sleeping spells mightn't have any greater side effects than extreme lethargy that could sit in for months but it was still a great offence to Harry who had brought the kid over so that he would've been able to care for him. Bill had wondered about the odd tension at the Order meeting but this...?

The door clicked open and Bill immediately noticed the haggard appearance of Harry. The straggly unkempt hair, the dark bags and the slouching hold. It wasn't anything like Harry normally looked and he was obvious stressed and probably slept badly because of it.

He's only fifteen. Bill couldn't help thinking. He acted much older but he was still just a kid.

"Lu Bill." Harry's eyes flickered up, troubled but alert all the same. Bill noted that the dog collar wasn't around his neck. Lupa was cradled in his arms and Harry lowered her to the floor, allowing her to scramble for the kitchen where her food had already been poured.

"Harry." Bill nodded as the boy ambled over and sunk down in the opposite chair after snagging a bottle of apple juice from the fridge. "Want to talk?"

"Do I have a choice?" Harry asked dryly but Bill could see his exhaustion, the strength that kept him acting relatively normally. But why did he go to such lengths to-

Bill could have smacked himself. "You love him." Oh it was so obvious!

Harry choked on his apple juice. "Excuse me?" He stared at Bill as if he'd just turned into a waltzing dragon.

Bill threw his head back and laughed. "I can't believe they don't see it!" Bill smiled at him fondly and Harry cocked an eyebrow at him, pretty sure the older boy had gone insane. "They think you're just friends but it's so much more, isn't it?" Bill leaned forward. "Who do you love the most?"

Harry dragged a hand through his hair with both eyebrows raised curiously. "John." He said easily.

"Because..." Bill said expectantly and he was by now looking incredible smug.

"... Because I view him as a little brother." Harry admitted with a shrug of his shoulders.

"And." Bill urged him.

Harry's eyes flickered and he furrowed his eyebrows. "I don't understand what you're getting at." Harry admitted reluctantly.

Bill sighed, leaning back. "Name all the people you love or trust Harry."

Harry's eyes flickered with unreadable emotions. "There is only John." He said at last. "I've never been close to mom and dad and Daniel have only recently tried to make an effort. Remus is too distant and Sirius never puts me at top priority, I'm always second to someone for him." Harry said.

"This has been going on for a long time, huh?" Bill said as Harry rose to dump the empty juice package.

Harry rolled his shoulders in a smooth shrug. "For as long as I can remember." He admitted and Bill noted that he seemed extremely reluctant to do so but at the same time Bill knew he needed to get this off his shoulders and Harry recognized that and he couldn't just go spill the beans to that kid of his simply because he was a muggle and Harry was a squib born in a wizarding family.

Bill couldn't imagine how hard it must've been, surrounded by an entire world that he wasn't allowed to invite any outsiders into or partake in properly himself, only watch and always on the sidelines. How hard it must be going to a muggle school but unable to bring home friends and his classmates whispered about a younger twin brother sent off to a school for the gifted while Harry stayed home. The disappointed and avoiding eyes of his parents and the fame of his brother and the sudden betrayal of his family as he struggled to take care of the one person he loved above all and had failed to protect...

"It's hard, huh?" Bill whispered as he tugged the reluctant boy into a hug. It took only a moment before Harry was practically clinging to

Bill but he didn't cry, only tightened his hold on Bill's shirt and buried his eyes into the black material and allowed the man to hold him as he struggled with the emotions tumbling inside of him.

I just wanted to protect you John...

Ace of Spades

"You, Sirius, are an idiot." Bill said firmly and with so much conviction that Sirius jaw popped open in surprise as Bill dusted of the soot from the fire place.

"So you solved it?" James asked before Bill could advance on Sirius who squeaked at the fury and felt icy shame wash through him at the cool disappointment and had to struggle with himself to not go darting through the fire place and lunge for Harry and beg for forgiveness. Groveling like a dog that ought to fit you, huh, Sirius?

But Bill was in no mood to deal with either of the elder Potters and hooking Sirius by the ear dragged him into his father's study, slammed the door shut and charmed it silent.

"Idiot." Bill said. "You are probably most moronic man on the planet at the moment and I'm not going to tell you why because it's embarrassingly obvious and I didn't even need him to tell me. All you need to do is look." Bill said firmly.

"But I am looking!" Sirius protested.

"And what do you see when you look at Harry?" Bill crossed his arms and stared down at him seriously. Sirius felt like a child and his mind whirled and he opened his mouth to spit out just what he saw when he looked at Harry only to come to such a sudden painful shameful halt that he actually dropped down on the floor in surprise.

A muggle boy.

Had he thought that? Surely his godson would've been a better answer?

But you wish Daniel was your godson, don't you? You got the wrongly wired kid. Poor poor Sirius.

And although Sirius desperately wanted to deny it he couldn't. But I still love him. He thought with conviction. More than Lily and James... He couldn't help but think and felt immediately shameful for it.

But you know which twin you would pick if it came to a choice between life and death...

Ace of Spades

"Lu Jonah." Jonah smiled widely when he caught sight of his favorite costumer and Harry would've found himself swept into a hug if he hadn't side stepped the older man easily with a smug smile as Jonah made an off twirl to keep himself from falling over.

"Been having fun in those ballerina classes?" Harry asked in amusement as Jonah turned to give him a smile half way between a sulk and a beam. It flipped to the later at Harry's question and Jonah looked just about ready to explode into a flowery rain of happiness.

"It's been absolutely wonderful my dear 'Ari." Jonah crooned as he pretended to fawn himself. "I can't believe you signed me up for them, it's a dream come true." He sighed happily.

"Think of it as an early Christmas present." Harry quirked a grin as he stroked his hands over his shining new motorcycle.

"Oh and I know you all too well my naughty little boy." Jonah caught his hand and brought it to his lips, kissing his knuckles gently. "You'll just buy me something anyway, I know you Harry." Jonah stroked his cheek gently, staring deep into his eyes.

"I doubt that Jonah." Harry's mouth twitched into an odd smile.

Jonah was only ten years older than Harry with black back slicked hair and brilliant blue eyes and very much gay. Harry had gotten him out of a... situation of sort three years earlier which had nearly landed Jonah in jail if it hadn't been for Harry's anonymous tip which he'd gained from a man who happened to owe him a favor.

They had sort of become friends after Harry confronted Jonah about it afterwards.

Harry watched with keen eyes as Jonah lifted each of Harry's hands to gently thread a pair of tight black leather gloves on them before carefully kissing his cheek. "Be careful 'Ari."

Ace of Spades

"You look better." John said happily as he threw his arms around Harry who blinked down at him before encircling him and lifting him up. Much to John's embarrassment and hidden delight he found himself on Harry's back with his arms around the older boy's neck.

John was small for his age and knew he looked more like an eleven year old at times. It was times like this that made him love it. Harry felt so big and comforting and John only needed to bury his face into his chest to feel safe because he knew Harry would always do everything in his power to protect him.

John can't help the light shade of pink that dusts his cheeks at the reminder of what had transpired almost three years ago when Harry had saved him. Harry had been there when he woke up the first time, staring at him with an odd mixture of emotions in his eyes and John had smiled groggily, adoringly up at him.

"You're my hero, Harry."

And Harry was and John loved him.

If you can, help others; if you cannot do that, at least do not harm them.

Helping Hand

"It's sooo hot." Ron groaned as he sprawled out on the grass, too tired to even fly. "Kill me." He breathed as he wiggled out of his wet t-shirt and threw it to the ground.

"It's England. It's supposed to rain." Daniel groaned pitifully. "What I wouldn't do for a drop of rain."

Harry's Rottweiler Lupa lay sprawled out beside him, half submerged in a bowl of water as she panted furiously. Hermione said that it worked as some kind of cooling system for dogs and Daniel had half in mind to copy the darn thing.

Hermione looked enviously untouched by the heat and was sunbathing while reading and Daniel had half in mind to drown her. Fuming silently Daniel clawed at the grass, wanting nothing more than to pass out under a monsoon.

Relief came with a glass of cooling lemonade from his mom and Daniel eagerly downed it in a matter of gulps and eagerly held out his glass for more, right beside Ron whose eyes were shining hungrily. Hermione shook her head in disgust at their behavior as she took her own glass. "Thank you Mrs Potter."

"It's alright dear." Lily smiled warmly before rolling her eyes in exasperation at the two boys crawling at her feet. "I will get you some more." She sighed and shook her head. "Just like his father..." Lily mumbled as she returned to the house.

"You are pitiful." Hermione deadpanned.

"Like worms." Ron agreed without shame. "Pitiful waggling worms. More lemonade."

"Hear, hear." Daniel agreed as he waved his glass whimsically through the air.

"I can't believe you're my best friends." Hermione shook her head with a grimace.

"Don't let them get to you Hermione." Lily laughed. "I had to deal with both Sirius and James in school and I'm so very glad Daniel didn't inherit the ability to nearly behead people playing pranks. Very nearly cost them their jobs at the Ministry in the end." Lily shook her head in fond exasperation.

"What did they do?" Daniel perked up.

"Nothing that should be repeated and that's all you need to know." She had already forbidden her husband and Sirius from breathing a word about it.

A sad frown crossed Lily's face as she made her way back to the house. Sirius had been acting differently later after that episode with Harry and the whole mess with John. He was always deep in thought and Harry still wouldn't talk to him, avoided everyone but Daniel and his friends actually.

Lily couldn't help but worry but at the same time she felt that she would only make it worse if she tried to interfere and she'd played a big role in the whole drama as well.

It was just a sleeping spell... Lily shook her head. She didn't understand why Harry had reacted as he had but there was obviously something she was missing and she couldn't figure out what. She had never been particularly close to her oldest son and she knew she was almost entirely to blame but at situations like this she couldn't help but wish she'd taken the time to know him better.

If only he'd been born with magic...

If only...

Ace of Spades

Harry was struggling and it wasn't his normal kind of struggling. Moral and responsibility was struggling to coexist inside of him and he was growing tired and snappish and he was still incredibly embarrassed for nearly breaking down in Bill Weasleys arms.

"What are you reading Harry?" Harry glanced up at his brother's godfather and for the first time in his life he wanted nothing more

than to slam his head against the closest wall and fall into the depths of unconsciousness and not wake up until everything was fine and dandy again and people stopped seeking him out simply to talk with him. It wasn't appreciated. Not on any level.

With a hidden grimace he gestured for Remus to step inside and stuffed the golden spinning top he'd been stroking into the depths of his pockets.

Remus sat down awkwardly on the computer chair, looking uncharacteristically serious and Harry cocked his head to the side with that arrogant twist he favored. "I'm not here for what you believe I'm here for." Remus said simply and Harry flickered the book he'd been pretending to read shut.

"I'm listening." He allowed and gave Remus his complete attention.

Remus for his part struggled to get everything together inside his stressed brain. There was a war coming and Daniel was the king on a shadowed chessboard and obsessedly spent every waking moment putting up regimes and listening to Hermione even when it was so painfully clear he wanted

nothing more than to play Quidditch or take a long nap in the shades.

The Potter family was falling apart and had been for a long time and in a time where family was everything the Potter family had never before been further apart.

Sirius was falling apart perfectly on his own and refused to talk no matter how Remus tried and had taken to vanish several times a day without explanation. Even pressing him up against the wall to demand answers had resulted in nothing and Remus was on his wits end.

And so Remus decided to seek out Harry... for advice.

Remus prided himself on being a good people reader but he knew that if there was anyone who was better than him, supernatural senses or not, it was Harry who had an uncanny knack for taking a single look on someone and tear them apart piece for piece, one layer after another for each time he saw them. It was the reason

Harry often came across as all-knowing and it tended to unnerve people.

Of course, Harry wasn't perfect but for the tiny chance that Harry knew something Remus didn't he would sacrifice his pride and ask the fifteen year old boy for help. "I need help."

But, oh how it stung...

Harry who had been watching him with keen but idle eyes actually startled and Remus had to fight down whatever will that wanted him out of that door. But he would do it for Sirius... for his best friend and it steeled his resolve. He took a deep breath. "With Sirius." He admitted.

He had expected the narrowed eyes but the blank look was something unaccounted and Remus wondered not for the first time he had missed during the first Order meeting. None would really speak about it and looked highly uncomfortable whenever he asked about it. Daniel had mumbled something about a sleeping spell on muggle and it had left Remus suspicious.

He hoped he was wrong... he really did.

"Do you know anything about Sirius sudden... depression?" Remus ventured carefully.

Dark amusement flashed across Harry's face and it put Remus on edge. "I do." He admitted with an infuriating shrug of his shoulders and expectant eyes.

Remus had never really gotten along with Harry; they were too alike in many ways and too different in others. He loved the kid, but not as much as Harry probably deserved and had always found himself more drawn to Daniel's more carefree attitude. They weren't strangers but not exactly close either.

They were a bit like distant family members who accepted each other's presences but didn't actively interact.

"Can you tell me?" He asked carefully.

Against with the amusement and Remus had to rein the wolf inside him as Harry's lips stretched into a sharkish grin. "I can."

He made no move to continue.

"Would you please tell me?" It went against every instinct of the alpha werewolf inside of him but he was as close to begging it pained and shamed him.

"All you had to do was ask." Harry said with an infuriating calm polite voice as he juggled a crimson apple in his hands. "You want to know why he's been avoiding everyone, do you not, hm?" Harry's eyes surveyed the apple with an edge of mockery to his body language. "Why he looks like he's suddenly on the verge of falling into tiny pieces?" Harry's eyes sharpened with mockery that put Remus on an edge.

Above all Remus had never liked the ease of which Harry picked him apart when he did everything in his power to only show people what he wanted them to see. "Yes." He forced his wolfish amber eyes to stay sharply focused with Harry's fine emerald green eyes even as they darkened with emotions too many for Remus to get a proper grasp on.

He licked the upper row of his teeth in that thoughtful habit of his. "It has nothing to do with you or mom or dad so you shouldn't worry. It was everything to do with me actually."

Remus stared into those infuriating calm eyes and had to wrestle with himself not jump the boy and shake him until the answers came spilling out as he made no move to continue, only watched him with flickering amusement and some other emotion Remus didn't even bother to try and understand.

"Why?" Harry traced the apple in his hand and lifted it to his lips to take a large bite of it which he chewed while Remus eyes steadily darkened and his lips itched to pull in a silent snarl. "Well?" It was out much a snarl but Harry didn't flinch back like most people would have.

"Who would you say Sirius loved the most, Remus?" Harry asked suddenly and Remus was caught off guard. "Me or Daniel?" The question probably would have infuriated anyone else for the lack of

answer but Harry was staring hard into his eyes, demanding him to see.

"Isn't he adorable, my godson – eh, Remy?"

"Look! Look what big Prongslet did! He's going to become something big, I just know it. Perhaps even the Minister of Magic himself. I would vote for him any time."

Remus remembered how proud Sirius had been, how utterly convinced that Harry would become something big and grey and green eyes had been focused equally adoring at each other. But he also remembered the trip to Hogwarts when Harry was two to talk with Madam Pomfrey and the devastating response...

"No magic... he has no magic..."

Sirius had been so broken and had shut himself off for weeks but he'd looked fine when he got out and hadn't been treating Harry any differently.

"What do you think Sirius sees when he looks at me?" Harry asked not unkindly. Remus shook his head.

"I don't believe it." He said firmly. "Sirius is a better person than that." He said with conviction that didn't waver even when Harry's look turned pityingly and disappointed.

Remus left the room without looking back.

Ace of Spades

Harry awoke late Saturday with Hermione Granger hovering anxiously above him and promptly rolled off his bed with a squeak. Hermione stared down at him in rapidly reddening horror as she realized his state of dress or lack thereof and slammed a hand over her eyes and turned away from his with a stream of stammered apologies as she blindly fumbled for the door and slammed it firmly shut behind her.

Mortified Harry face palmed and resolved to never sleep naked again as long as his brother had guests in the house. Slipping on a pair of dark jeans and a simple white t-shirt and matching socks

Harry ventured to the guestroom which Hermione had claimed as her own and knocked. Still red faced and avoiding looking anywhere but his face and she waved him inside.

The guestroom was like any other guest room in the house, artful but simple and the one Hermione had chosen had been painted in soft blues. There was a queen sized bed in the middle of the north wall and a dresser, a bookcase, a plushy chair with a lamp above it for reading and a bedside table placed neatly around it. The bookcase had been impressively filled and Harry let his eyes wander curiously over the spines, impressed by her reading.

There were both muggle and wizard books and while he recognized nearly all her choice of muggle reading and had read most of them he could only guess the contents of half her wizard books.

"Do you read?" Hermione asked, her mortification apparently overcome by her curiosity. "Magical books I mean?"

Harry reluctantly tore his eyes from the books and stared into her brown eyes which made him think of dark rich chocolate. "I do." Harry gave her a lopsided grin. "It's a bit like reading fantasy books." He admitted with a wink.

Hermione lightened up. "I know what you mean. When I visited Diagon Alley for the first time I thought I'd walked straight into C.S Lewis magical wardrobe." Hermione laughed.

"A big fan?" Harry asked curiously.

Hermione nodded. "A bit childish, perhaps, but I greatly admire him right along with J.R.R Tolkien, Robin Hobb and Neil Gaiman." Hermione admitted.

"The Farseer Trilogy is great." Harry agreed. "I really admired Fitz. To constantly sacrifice so much for everyone around him... It's an honorable trait. I really thought he was going to snap when Nighteye died."

"I know."

They shared a contemplative silence before Harry decided to breach what had been on his mind since awakening. "Hermione, exactly

why were you in my room?" She was Daniel's friend and while they had spoken here and there and poured over strategies together he had hardly considered her close enough to have her wander into his room or him into hers, not without a knocking and invite.

"I well, I needed your advice." She didn't seem like that kind of person that asked for help and the fact that she had searched him out made him curious. Her dark eyes searched out his own. "How much to do know about Hogwarts?" She asked eventually.

"Enough." Harry was curious now and watched her with keen eyes as she stroked the spines of her books as he'd itched to do earlier. "I've read Hogwarts a History." He allowed after a moment as she made no move to respond. "And I listen to my parents and Daniel share his stories at the dinner table."

"So you know everything we've been through at Hogwarts?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head despite knowing she couldn't see it. "No, I do not." And he didn't elaborate on that.

She turned towards him again, troubled. "Sit down." She gestured for her bed, not the chair curiously enough and he did as told despite his dislike to being commanded, sinking down in the soft blue covers while she remained standing, staring intently on him.

"First year." She said resolutely. "Ron, Daniel and I are sorted into Gryffindor and Dumbledore warns us not to search out the third floor unless we want to die a very painful death. We being we, of course, somehow lands ourselves before a gigantic three headed dog which nearly snaps our heads off and I notice it standing on a trapdoor while Daniel informs us about the grubby package Hagrid mentioned picking up at Gringotts. On Halloween Ron insults me and I end up crying in the bathroom, a troll is let loose and, of course, it happens to wander into the only room in school where a student has been left alone and defenseless. Ron and Daniel save me and we become friends."

She had begun to pace while Harry listened with rapt interest, wondering just where she was going with this.

"Our DADA teacher Professor Quirrell is starting to act weird right alongside Professor Snape and we suspect the later of foul play when Daniel overhear a conversation in the woods on one of his secret nightly escapades on his smuggled broom. We learn about the philosopher's stone and when saving Hagrid from having his hut burned down by an illegal dragon we get caught and put in attention. We follow Hagrid into the Forbidden Forest where Daniel has his first meeting with Voldemort which sets his scar on fire and Hagrid arrives just in time to scare it off. A week later we're going down the trapdoor and we manage to get past Professor Sprouts Devil's Snare, Professor Flitwicks flying keys and Professor McGonagall's gigantic chess set which knocked Ron out. Faced with Professor Snape's logical puzzle we realize there is only enough for one person and Daniel continues on his own while I run for help. Daniel faces Voldemort for the second time and survives again."

Harry had heard about it, of course, after finding the house empty of his parents with a note not to worry when he got home from school and after hours of agonizing waiting someone had finally been sent and everything explained. He was forbidden from visit Hogwarts and had to wait a month before seeing his twin and Daniel had been fully healthy by then and tired of sharing the story with details. He'd spent nearly the entire month alone and gleaned the details from Sirius when he came to check up on him.

"Second year. Ron and Daniel are late for the sorting because someone blocked off the wall and they are forced to use Daniel's owl River to send for help. There are blood writing on the walls and the new DADA professor Gilderoy Lockheart is quickly turning out to be as incompetent as the last. People are turning up petrified and Hagrid lures us out with the inane advice to follow the spiders after being shipped off to Azkaban. We meet Aragog and just barely manage to escape with the help from Firenze, one of the centaurs in the forest. Daniel is nearly killed during Quidditch due to a rogue Bludger and I'm petrified."

It had been just after he'd been shot...

"I had just managed to figure out it was a Basilisk and that it moved through the pipes and had scrawled it down on a piece of paper while watching the corners through a mirror I had conjured. I was unlucky. Daniel and Ron found the note and moments after that it's made clear that Ginny Weasley has been taken to the depths of the

Chamber of Secrets and forcing Lockheart who had been trying to flee with them. Lockheart steals Ron's wand but Daniel manages to catch him off guard but the spells makes the ceiling cave, Lockheart is knocked out and Daniel is forced to go on his own. Daniel meets Tom Marvolo Riddle's apparition and finds Ginny cold and barely breathing, clutching a strange black diary he's seen her writing in the entire year. Riddle turns out to be Voldemort and summons the basilisk."

She had stopped pacing and was facing the window, away from him.

"Professor Dumbledore's Phoenix Fawkes appears with the and Daniel summons the sword of Gryffindor through it. Fawkes blinds the Basilisk and climbing the statue of Salazar Slytherin Daniel throws himself through the air and manages to pierce the Basilisk through its head and mouth but the height breaks both his legs when he land and with the bones forced through the skin he's rapidly bleeding to death. Through pain he manages to struggle on his knees and snatching the diary before the furious Riddle Daniel manages to draw out the sword and pierce it and Riddle who had been feeding on Ginny's life-force is vanquished and Ginny jolted back to life. Fawkes carries them out and Ginny calls for help seconds before Daniel loses consciousness. The culprit for the charmed wall and Bludger turns out to be Dobby the house elf and Daniel manages to trick Lucius Malfoy into releasing him.

Third year. Once again we've gotten ourselves stuck with a useless DADA teacher, Tobias Wroughstone. Thankfully the year is calm for us but he's found to be a swindling fraud whose been using the Imperius curse to force girls to sleep with him before charming away their memories. He's caught in the act by Professor Snape after the increasing speculations from several older Slytherins and all girls fifth year and over were sent to St. Mungos to have the memory blocks removed and Wroughstone was eventually killed."

"Who was the girl?" Harry asked, brow creased.

Hermione startled. "Which of them?"

"The one who was found by Snape." Harry demanded. "The one Tobias was found in the act with."

"Angelina Johnson." Hermione admitted sadly. "A Gryffindor seeker."

"And the entire school knows of it?" Harry growled.

"I, well, yes." Hermione said, flustered by his sudden anger. "Everyone knows everything that goes on at Hogwarts. That's how it's always been." Hermione peered curiously at him. "Why?"

Harry shook his head, deep in thought and waved her on. Hermione did so reluctantly and she shot him several contemplative glances as she forced her way through the fourth year.

"Fourth year. We get a new teacher, an old Auror named Alastor Moody and the Triwizard Tournament is being held at Hogwarts and the Bulgarian school Durmstrang and the French school Beauxbatons is invited to Hogwarts. Cedric Diggory is chosen from the Hufflepuff house, Fleur Delacour from Beauxbatons and Victor Krum from Durmstrang. Daniel is then forced to compete as the forth champion which brings him a lot of grief from the rest of the school. Ron and I are about the only faithful in the Gryffindor house. The first task turned out to be dragons and Daniel manages to charm it blind after luring it away from the nest and snatch the golden egg before it could eat him.

In the second task he has to find something in the depth of the lake. I'm chosen as Victor Krum's hostage after dancing with him at the Yule Ball and Ron as Daniels. Daniel is the first to arrive up after eating gillyweed generously supplied by Sirius after writing him a letter. The third task, the Labyrinth... the Graveyard..." Hermione sighs sadly. "Cedric Diggory is murdered by Voldemort after he'd been brought back to life by Bartemius Crouch Jr. who turned out to be Alastor Moody in disguise after his disappearance is noted and his office searched to find the real Alastor Moody stuffed in a trunk. Daniel dueled Voldemort and a connection formed between their wands and the ghosts of people Voldemort had murdered sprang into existence and helped Daniel escape with the dead body of Cedric."

Hermione took a deep breath and rounded on him with hard determined eyes. "Do you recognize a single continuation in these four years?" She demanded.

"The teachers." Harry nodded. She had put a heavy empathize on them so it was hard not to realize. He scrutinized her closely and it dawned on him what she was trying to tell him. "You want to start a dueling club?"

Hermione nodded seriously. "Neither Daniel or Ron was taken with the idea which means I'm working on my own. They're both busy trying to learn the list of spells I've written down for them anyway so I came to think of you."

She stared at Harry and Harry stared back at her. "So you think I'll be able to help you?" It was a foreign idea, someone of the wizarding world actually asking for his help and opinion when he was considered the average muggle boy by most of which he met.

"Of course." And she said it with such conviction Harry was actually surprised and he found himself surprisingly touched by her belief in him. "You live between two worlds Harry, just like I do and I'm considered the brightest witch of my generation. The wizarding world is so caught up in their old ideas that they forget to bring in new ones and new ones are exactly what we need." Her dark rich eyes bore into him. "You've already proved yourself Harry. Those ideas you had..." She shook her head. "I couldn't have done it better myself." She said earnestly. "Will you help me?"

Harry dragged a hand through his messy black hair and peered at her with keen green eyes. "Are you sure about this? About wanting my help, truly?"

"One hundred percent." Hermione said firmly.

Harry shrugged and smiled, his eyes crinkling. "How can I say no to that?"

I sometimes react to making a mistake as if I have betrayed myself. My fear of making a mistake seems to be based on the hidden assumption that I am potentially perfect and that if I can just be very careful I will not fall from heaven. But a 'mistake' is a declaration of the way I am, a jolt to the way I intend, a reminder I am not dealing with the facts. When I have listened to my mistakes I have grown.

Aes

It could all be blamed on the fact that it was the second time Harry found himself assaulted in his bed in the nude that week and he was still kind of hi-strung from what he considered to be among several of the many no-noes he had about Daniels friends (i.e. letting them surprise him, letting him surprise him on the bed, letting them surprise him on the bed in the nude). The fact that he was sleeping in the nude again could be blamed on comfort and the fact that Daniel and his little friends were at the Weasleys and would be so for the next three day and his parents knew better than to scare the living hell out of him seven o'clock in the morning.

So when the cheerful "Wotcher Harry!" assaulted his sleep bedraggled senses in a voice he had never even heard before he did the only thing that seemed natural.

He pinned them.

On the bed.

In the nude.

Harry came around to having a bubblegum pink haired woman beneath him, her hair and eyes rapidly turning burning red under his bemused gaze. She looked surprise, if a bit shocked but it wasn't until her leering eyes wandered downwards that he came around to truly take in the situation and for the second time he found himself rolling off the bed with a bedraggled squeak he would deny under torture.

It was a relief that the woman hadn't scream and called more people, he didn't like his arse on display thank-you-very-much. Nymphadora Tonks, or Tonks as she put heavy empathize on, seemed good-natured about the whole thing, thankfully (apparently she had CONSTANT VIGILANCE Moody as her mentor and she told him

brightly that the grizzled Auror probably would have charmed her buttocks off for surprising an unknown factor).

"So we keep this between the two of us, right 'Ari." She teased with a sly wink as she left the room with a swagger.

It was kind of hard not to take an instant liking to her. Like with Bill, it was just a good feeling he had and Harry relied heavily on his gut instincts when it came to people (Lady Luck seemed to have some twisted up-and-down fondness for him but thankfully it was very rare that he was wrong about people).

Wiggling into a pair of wrangler jeans with white skulls on the buttocks, a black t-shirt and a brown hoodie, and of course white socks Harry made his way downstairs in search of cotton candy hair. Ignoring the déjà vu feeling he got he traipsed down the stairs and was immediately assaulted by an eagerly barking Lupa who he scooped up, nuzzling his face against hers as he wandered into the kitchen.

"Wotcher lover-boy." Tonks greeted him cheerfully, glancing up from where she was conversing lowly with a man who looked like he'd taken a dive through a blender and somehow made it out alive with one dark eye and one rolling blue, a purple bowler on his head, a matching scarf around his neck and a purple coat which darkened his face to the point that the blue eye practically shone from the depth. His hair was dark and straggly and Harry could faintly make out a wooden leg beneath the table. Save for Moody and Tonks the room was empty.

"Tonks, Moody." He greeted with a cordial nod of his head, meeting the intense look of the grizzled Auror calmly and with tilt of his head that bared his neck to the man in a way that was likely be seen as arrogant by others but submissive to the trained eye. Harry was arrogant, yes, but he wasn't stupid enough to challenge the man who had captured a good portion of the inmates in Azkaban.

The single blue eyes sharpened before the man gave him a miniscule nod. Tonks gave him a long look before smiling. "Come on over here." She patted the seat next to her and he swaggered over, copying her walk earlier to near perfection with a cheeky wink that made her stick out her tongue.

"I take it you have a reason for the pleasant awakening?" Harry asked cordially as he snatched up an apple, juggling it with dexterous fingers but making no move to take a bite out of it. He'd recently visited his apple paradise to stock up and had pretty much eaten himself to apple perfection the night before. Lupa curled contently in his lap.

Moody shot Tonks a look which the woman returned cluelessly with a raised eyebrow as she chewed her marmalade sandwich. Growling he kicked her. "Oi!" Tonks snarled as she scrambled to get away from him. "What the hell was that for?" Moody cocked an eyebrow and to Harry's intense amusement she went cherry red. "Oh. Oh yes. I forgot, silly me." She coughed embarrassedly and edged up to Harry. "Good luck." She breathed with a foul look at Moody, ruffling his hair before calmly walking out of the kitchen, the door clicking shut behind her.

Harry tensed as Moody drew his wand but the old Auror made no move to point it towards him and Harry watched silently as the Auror muttered underneath his breath as he waved it around. A blue light flickered from the tip and spread around the room to settle against the walls before flickering off.

"No one can hear us." Moody explained with an absent look at the boy who was still watching him warily and Alastor noted with approval the way the boy was subtly bending his knees, one hand in his pocket where he gripped the shaft of a knife. "Good, good..." He muttered under his breath as he limped up to the boy, wand in sight. "I'm not going to hurt you boy." Alastor grunted as he roughly gripped the boy's chin and pulled him down, closer, for inspection. Eyes narrowed the boy reluctantly allowed him, green eyes flickering with irritation.

"Do you know how to run, boy?" Moody grunted as he released him.

Resisting the urge to rub his chin Harry huffed. "Of course I do; I don't go to a wizard school. We have three hours worth of P.E every week in school and I play soccer and baseball after school three or four times a week during season. If I'm not doing any of that I'm in the forest, running, climbing trees or swimming." Harry counted off with a sneer.

Alastor merely grunted, his blue eye spinning in its socket as he looked the boy up and down. "Adequate." He decided. As he'd judged from the way the boy walked and moved he was made for agility and probably used to hard work and kept himself regularly in shape. It made his work much easier. "The knife, you know how to use that?" Moody demanded.

The hand still curled protectively around the handle twitched. "I don't go around stabbing people for fun." Harry said stiffly.

Moody took that as a no.

"You need training." Moody grunted as he sunk back down in his seat. Harry reluctantly copied him across the table. "Not just you, but your brother, Mr Weasley and Miss Granger are all going to be important chess pieces in his game and for the Orders," Moody's blue eye flickered in warning when the boy's eyes darkened, "sanity's sake it has been decided that you should get at least some basic training in self-defense."

Harry frowned. "Even so a knife won't be much help on a battlefield if I have to run, not amidst a sea of curses. It'll get me killed. A knife is only good in close range fighting."

"True." Moody nodded with approval as he fished up something Harry recognized very well and he rose abruptly when it came into view, nearly tipping his chair back. Moody ignored him completely. "It's a CZ 75B." He laid the sleek black pistol on the table, still in its sheath before placing a package of ammo beside it. "It's yours."

"I'm not going to use a gun." Harry growled in disgust and his bullet wounds burned uncomfortably at the thought. Anthony's mad eyes flashed in front of his open eyes and the reminder of the trembling gun aimed at John's sobbing body made his blood boil with agony. "I won't." He snarled when Moody merely stared at him patiently.

"You will because you don't have any other choice." Harry opened his mouth to retort but Moody was faster, reaching over the table and grabbing Harry's shirt, jerking the boy towards him. "You listen and you listen well." Moody snarled in the shocked boy's face. "You are nothing but a pawn in a game too big for you to comprehend and we can't afford to have you captured. Do. You. Understand?" Moody growled at the struggling boy in his grip. "If you want you and your

little friend to be killed that is entirely up to you but when, and I say when because you will be captured like any defenseless muggle before you, I expect you to chop off that cowardly tongue of yours so they don't learn anything." Moody released him abruptly and Harry stumbled back to his feet, eyes burning black with loathing. He swiveled around and left the room, door slamming shut behind him.

Moody sunk down in his chair with a tired sigh and closed both his eyes.

Harry had taken the gun with him.

Ace of Spades

John dodged his attacker, stumbling forward to keep the round object from being taken. Weaving his way through the throng of people, barely aware of anything but his own pounding heart and aching breath as he drew his foot back and smashed it forward against the black and white ball. There was a herald of cheers as John came to a jogging halt only to find himself tackled and lifted by his laughing, sweaty team and grinning like a loon he waved to the cheering and grinning parents.

If there was one sport John could measure himself with Harry in it was soccer. Harry had always been the attacker, the fierce power that led his team and his voice sounded often, encouraging and strong and unwavering in his belief for them.

Harry was a born leader; it was so embarrassingly clear whenever he got himself involved in sport. The standoffish, mocking, arrogant boy who was suddenly the king of the crowd and the force that made their tired feet pound. John had always admired that about him and John aspired to be just the same, just as good as Harry was. Harry had two years over him so he doubted he would ever be able to best Harry but with all the extra training with Harry and he could aspire to be the king of the crowd in his own age group.

And when he was an adult John was going to play for England and Harry was going to watch him on the sidelines with that proud gleam in his eyes and a wide smile on his lips and he was going to cheer for John and John only and when the game was over and he got the cup he was going to give it to Harry who would ruffle his hair and pull him into a one armed hug like his dad used to do.

Dreams.

John missed his dad, a lot. Sometimes he would lay awake and think about those sunny smiles and the blue eyes he had inherited. John looked more like his mom than his dad but his eyes... his eyes were just like his dad's, that's what his mom always told him and John could stand for hours just watching them in the mirror... wondering. But he was dead and Anthony gone and his mom were always tired and working late and while she did what she could she was never really there when he needed her.

But John had Harry and one day he was going to make Harry proud.

One day...

Ace of Spades

"You look sad." Luna said softly, reaching out with pale slim fingers to brush away a lock of black hair from his eyes. "You aren't supposed to look sad." Luna balanced easily on her kneecaps before him.

"I'm not supposed to look sad?" Harry asked dryly. He sat with one knee pulled up against his chest while his other dangled lazily, his back against the trunk. "What is that supposed to-"

"You already know." Luna admonished, tugging at a jet black lock of hair. "Feel sad, not look sad."

"Only around John." Harry furrowed his eyebrows thoughtfully as he studied her. "But you already know that."

"You don't allow anyone to see." Luna flicked his nose. "Bad Harry."

Harry wrinkled his nose but his lips twitched, itching to pull into his famous lopsided smirk. "I don't allow anyone to see?"

"No."

"No?"

"Yes."

Harry stared at Luna in bemusement. "Yes?"

Her eyes were intense as she leaned forward, so close that he could feel her warm breath against his lips and the soft smell of oranges washed over him. "You do not comprehend." She said, almost accusingly. For some reason Harry felt a pang and his hand darted up to touch the golden monkey in his ear. Her silvery grey eyes followed the movement with something akin to approval. "Do you know about the Monkey in the Chinese Zodiac?" She asked him seriously, head tilting in an eerie imitation of his own but without the arrogance.

"I do not." Harry admitted, curious to what she was trying to tell him.

"Inventor, motivator, improviser, quick-witted, inquisitive, flexible, innovative, problem solver, self-assured, sociable, artistic, polite, dignified, competitive, objective, factual, intellectual." Luna said, each word slow and precise and she allowed him a second to mull them over and memorize. "But Monkeys can also be egotistical, vain, arrogant, selfish, reckless, snobbish, deceptive, manipulative, cunning, jealous, and suspicious." She was so close their noses were touching. "What are you?"

Harry opened his mouth to respond, the words familiar in his mouth but he stopped himself short. Luna leaned back, folding her arms carefully in her lap as she knelt before him, tucking her feet carefully and elegantly. "I am a Monkey?" Harry prodded carefully, studying her face carefully.

She said nothing, merely flickered her eyes as if urging him to find the answer of what she asked of him. "You said I'm not supposed to allow anyone to see." Harry mused thoughtfully, slumping backwards with a grace he had perfected. "But the only one I truly hide from is John, is it not?"

"No." Luna shook her head. "You allow him to see." There was no admonishment in her voice, if anything there was pride for reasons he couldn't grasp.

"So I'm allowed to let him see?" Harry asked puzzled, if not amused, but Luna looked so serious that he soon found his face reflecting the

depths of her eyes as she nodded silently. "But I allowed Moody to see, I wasn't supposed to do that?"

"You did not." Luna rebutted. "You are Harry; you are what they see, what you allow them to see." For some reason this seemed very important to her and Harry twisted the words carefully back and forth. "People think they understand you but they do not." Luna said carefully.

"What about Bill?" Harry dragged a hand through his hair with an inquisitive look. "I let him see."

"You only let him scratch the surface. He thinks he understands but he doesn't, you will not allow him."

"I'm not supposed to let them see and I won't allow them to see?"

"Exactly." Luna smiled and Harry jerked slightly as the girl threw herself into his lap, hugging his waist tightly as she buried her head into his chest. He could feel her stretching smile through the thin material of his t-shirt and his stomach muscles curled at the feeling of her warm breath. Slowly, hesitantly, he pulled her closer and felt her stretching smile.

"I'm the Monkey, the inventor and improviser, cunning, manipulative and deceptive. I will not allow those who aren't supposed to see to see. I slipped." Harry said with realization as he breathed in her smell. "The gun, it made me slip. John made me slip. I'm not supposed, not allowed by myself to show my weakness."

Luna listened to his heartbeats. "You are human. You will always slip." Luna cuddled closer, closing her eyes and allowing him to pull her closer as he shifted beneath her to make it more comfortable.

"And since I'm human I'm allowed to be confused?" Harry asked with a trace of amusement. "I still do not understand." Harry said apologetically, feeling honestly disappointed. "I understand what you say but not its meaning. Why do I not allow myself to show weakness? Why is it so important?"

"You will learn." Luna reassured with a kittish yawn. "One day you'll understand..." Her hand brushed the monkey in his ear and it pinged with a soft light, turning from gold to metal. "One day Aes."

Ace of Spades

"Harry! Harry – hey, wait up!" Daniel stumbled after Harry, struggling to keep his pace in the straggling forest that caught hold of his clothes and kept tugging him backwards, as if to keep him away from Harry who was moving quickly and gracefully without a hint of emotion on his blank face.

Behind them Daniel could still hear the arguing voices of their parents and fury bubbled through him. He came to a halt as the night swallowed Harry and Daniel spun on the spot, slamming his fist against the closest tree trunk.

"You're just a squib! You have no magic, you're helpless!"

Had he really heard that from his mom? Daniel stared helplessly into the darkness, trying to imagine how his brother was feeling. Harry hadn't even been given a chance to explain, and he had tried. Daniel had seen the restraint in the white knuckles, the only sign that belied Harry's calm as their mom raged, bearing down like a furious demon as if Harry was the reason to blame when he'd been coerced into the whole thing.

Daniel had tried to stop her, had been right beside James as he jumped to restrain his wife but the open hand had collided with a heart chilling slap that drained Harry of any emotion. Daniel had even seen the Monkey's never-ending smile turn downwards in a displeased frown, bellying the false calm as Harry spun around and marched out.

Please be alright big'bro...

Ace of Spades

"HARRY!" John tackled the other boy and it was with mutual surprise Harry toppled to the ground. However surprised by the fact that he'd managed to catch Harry of guard John quickly shook it off as he straddled older boy, arms crossed over his chest. "Where the hell where you? You were supposed to be at the game but you weren't." John pouted, he couldn't help himself. He had expected Harry to be there and it had been a shock not to find him.

A peculiar emotion flickered in his big brother's eyes but John didn't spare it much thought. "I missed you." He admitted, averting his eyes from Harry's. "I told you about the game, I-" John searched for words but found none and his eyes burned with what felt suspiciously like tears. He was thirteen! A big boy! He wasn't supposed to cry! But he didn't dare wipe them, knowing Harry would without doubt catch the action and John wanted nothing more than to be strong for Harry.

A thumb brushed beneath his eyes, wiping away the warm tear that dared to spill outside his control and John stared hard at the ground in shame and humiliation. Had he looked down he would have found the absolute devastation shining in his proclaimed big brother's eyes.

I made him cry...

Harry's chest burned as he slowly sat up, John slid down to straddle his lap. It was dark and the grass wet with dew and the curtains drawn in the Brown's house. No doubt Jessica was already asleep but John had stayed awake to wake for him. The sky was black and dotted with stars and dogs barked from one of houses down the street.

"I'm sorry." Harry whispered, forcing his voice to remain steady. "Things aren't too good at home."

And they weren't. An argument had exploded at the Potters between Lily and James. Lily had been absolute aghast to discover the training plans for knife and gun James had asked of Moody and wouldn't listen to reason. When she had learned that he had the gun in his possession she had rounded furiously at him, eyes alight in fear and horror mixing with sharp hot anger that twisted through her.

"Don't you remember!"

How could Harry ever forget? He sighed, rubbing his aching head and he blinked as John wormed his arms around him and pressed his head against Harry's chest as Luna had done hours ago but instead of oranges the smell pine enveloped him. "You scared me." John said with a small voice. "You've never missed a game before. You've never-" broken a promise before. But John couldn't get the words to leave his lips. He'd been so scared, so scared when Harry didn't appear to sweep him into a congratulating hug. He wasn't

angry, he didn't feel betrayed but he'd been so terrified. "I thought something happened to you."

"I'm sorry." John jerked at the broken tone in the wavering voice of his big brother but Harry's strong arms prevented him from looking up, to catch the devastation that radiated in his face. "There has been a terrorist attack on my brother's school and Tom tried to kill Daniel. Mom has been absolute hysteric and dad thought it'd be a great idea to get some lessons of protection behind her back. Mom wasn't happy and somehow got the idea that it was all my idea." Harry touched his stinging cheek with a sigh.

"Tom is still alive?" John had heard about Tom Marvolo Riddle, the terrorist who had tried to kill Daniel and Harry when they had been small. Daniel had been left with a lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead, apparently some sick idea of the cult Tom lead. But before killing Daniel they'd been interrupted and Tom deadly harmed and he'd been thought dead for the last fourteen years.

"Yes." Harry said grimly. "And suddenly the world is turning upside down."

"And topsy-turvy." John clenched his hands in Harry's shirt. "You promise to never do it again?" He begged, wanting the comfort and knowledge of Harry being there.

"For as long as I'm alive I will always come for you." Harry promised solemnly.

And for John that was enough.

Ace of Spades

Hermione was deep in thoughts Sunday morning as she skimmed through book after book. Harry had been an extreme help when it came to helping her juggle all the different things she was trying to accomplish. The Dueling Club was becoming more than an idea, it was actually becoming something she could go through with and she admitted it could have become very messy if it weren't for Harry.

They had both gotten the news of the new DADA teacher from Dumbledore when he visited. Hermione had noted Harry's tensed form and filed it into the back of her head as she consulted the

elderly wizard about her idea. Dumbledore had cautioned her to pull it off in secret as this new Dolores Umbridge was pulled by the strings of the Ministry and more importantly Cornelius Fudge. They all knew about the Minister's fears about Dumbledore creating some kind of army; the slander in the news paper had made it very clear in a matter of days.

They were trying to make Dumbledore and Daniel out to be some kind of insane, attention seeking fools seeking to relive past triumphs. It was slow building, the world had heavy faith in the boy-who-lived who they had followed the growth from babe to teen and Dumbledore who had rid them of Grindelwald but the slander was slowly working its way and creating doubt and wavering hearts. Hermione hated that weakness in humans.

Dolores Umbridge was being sent to Hogwarts to keep an eye on Dumbledore and Daniel and was by no doubt going to try and cause trouble. Hermione had been troubled by the idea of going behind backs but Dumbledore had assured her his faith and hope in her idea and Harry had butted in with his whole saving lives means more than education idea (nicely put in a way that made Dumbledore chuckle in surprise and appreciation and Hermione go bright red).

All they needed was a room and a way of recruiting people... and a leader. Hermione massaged her temples, just barely catching the near silent steps of Harry and she looked up, hopeful to find the answers she needed only to find her words turned into a choked warble that made Harry's glare darken.

"I see Tonks left you a present." Hermione giggled, taking in his pink hair with silent appreciation. It didn't really surprise her that he managed to pull the color off. Harry had a way with colors that could only be likened with Dumbledore and Hermione had no doubt that Harry could make a leopard loincloth look good; it was just the way with Harry. The way he radiated confidence with a lilting arrogance that demanded an unconscious respect. Dumbledore did the same but without the arrogance and more with an aged wisdom that was impossible to ignore.

They were both leaders.

Hermione had seen it in Daniel as well but only during pressure, as if he resented it while Dumbledore and Harry had embraced it and made it apart of them. Hermione had no doubt Daniel would be just as wonderful and attractive in his roll of a leader and she knew it was coming soon. War was closing in.

"Do you want me to solve your problems or should I seek out Lupa and whisper my greatness to her instead?" Hermione folded her arms across her chest and cocked an eyebrow, daring him. Harry mirrored her expression and body language with an eerie ease. Minutes ticked past and Hermione's eye twitched with her decreasing patience.

"Oh just tell me." She snapped.

Harry made a sweeping, bow. "Of course Your Highness. " His eyes danced with cunning and luring arrogance. "Mione dear, have you ever heard about the Room of Requirement...?"

If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed.

Hope

"Kill the spare!"

Why did it burn, make his chest hurt, made him feel too much? Curled up under the warm water, knees drawn to his chest and chin despondently placed on them, his left arm curled loosely around them and his right hand resting on his chest Daniel stared hollow eyed down at the pooling water, trying to make the memories disappear.

Daniel could see Cedric's eyes as wide and alive as they had been when they gripped the cup together, it flickered before him together with the tumbling regret and shame that wouldn't leave him alone. His fingers dug into the flesh above his heart, as if to tear it out and he closed his eyes against the waves of pain that rose like a wave inside him and a horse sob tumbled through his lips. Why was life so unfair? Cedric... Cedric wasn't supposed to die, wasn't even supposed to even be there but Daniel had insisted, bright eyed and foolish and so fucking naïve.

"Kill the spare!"

The nightmare was so familiar, so close to his heart that it haunted his waking hours. Turning the corners, catching flickers of bronze hair in ghostly apparitions that never were real. His mom and dad was worried, he knew, he saw their eyes – so pitying, as if they understood. But how can they? Daniel thought bitterly. He was prophesized to kill the darkest wizard in over a century. Remembering Voldemort's burning eyes, keen with madness and dark twisted intelligence, like flickering flames warning you not to get too close or risk getting burned.

"Daniel Potter...the boy-who-lived. Tell me... how is your brother?" Yes, how was Harry? Could he answer honestly, have the innermost thoughts of his twin on the tip of his tongue? No. No, Daniel could answer and the triumph and sick, sick understanding in blood red eyes had made his stomach twist and it had taken everything he had not to throw up. "You understand." And Daniel did and it made him sick. Sick, sick, sick, sick. I'm such an idiot!

The tremors shook through his body and tears fell, mixing with the steaming water and he couldn't stop, couldn't prevent the tears from falling and the half-choked sobs from wrecking his body with coiling pain and shame.

"Mom and dad won't love you because you don't have any magic!"

"Why won't mom look at you, Harry?"

"Look! Look! I made it fly! Hey Harry, look, look! I bet you can't do anything like this!"

"You're just jealous 'cause I have something you can't have. Dad says so."

"I hate you muggle."

It was a myriad of words from years of dislike and watching green eyes grew cold and distant, watching the open smiling boy clamor up, pretending that the boy wasn't his brother but something wrong something that didn't belong in their perfect magical family. It was impossible to compare the tiny child that shot him hurtful looks to the cool and intelligent Harry James Potter who didn't hate him but didn't trust him. Who had grown-up, away from the coiling anger and away from their family and had gotten himself a new little brother and Daniel hated himself because he couldn't even hate John!

I drove him away, and wasn't that the truth? He didn't have a claim on Harry any longer. He tried to find the time, he really did, but with the war... Fuck the war! Daniel was scared, so scared. Didn't want to see Voldemort again and especially not fight him. He was going to lose! His soul cried, his heart wept. Don't wanna! Don't wanna! Don't wanna! I DON'T WANT TO DIE!

But did he have a choice?

Did I ever?

No. It was a thought filled with such bitterness that it scared him. He hated that his parents didn't try to protect him from it, didn't try to hide him away.

Harry would have.

If John had been destined... If John had been the boy-who-lived Harry would have wrapped strong comforting arms around his shoulders and taken him for a walk and never again be seen by the wizard world. Harry would have kept John safe, would have come up with a way to kill Voldemort that didn't mean any danger to his charge because John would have asked him for safety and Harry would do anything to keep John safe and happy.

Daniel wanted that; that closeness between brothers. Wanted the strength to ask his big brother for help but knowing he was too cowardly and too ashamed to do so.

He's just a muggle, what can he do to protect me?

Daniel hated that the thought dared to exist inside him. He wanted it gone, wanted the part of him that resented Harry for what he was gone. Gone, gone, gone, GO AWAY! Daniel bit down hard on his knee to keep himself from screaming, felt the coppery taste of blood mix with water and saliva inside his mouth as he sobbed. He bit harder, sunk his teeth deeper. WHY WON'T IT GO AWAY! He tried, he did! Watched Harry help Hermione, watching him making his friend happy and loved the pride that flickered warmth in his heart. That's my brother! He wanted to say, so why did the words feel so thick in his mouth?

"DON'T YOU COME NEAR HIM!"

Five words. A prime number. Harry's number.

The vision of Harry cradling the unconscious body of John and mom's startled look as Harry rounded on her with such anger and spite was forever burned into his mind. Daniel had never before seen Harry so furious and he hated that hungry red eyes flashed before his vision as he stared in the venomous eyes of his big brother. Hated himself. Hated Voldemort. Hated Harry. Stupid muggle don't belong! He doesn't belong!

Daniel could feel the bone beneath his teeth and jerked startled, staring wide eyed down at the bleeding wound with dark topaz eyes. I love him. Daniel wanted to burn the words into his heart, make it

see that he didn't hate Harry, didn't spite him for what he was or wasn't.

Because that's what it's all about, isn't it? Daniel wanted Harry to be normal so that he could share the wondrous world of magic like when they played Hogwarts and Houses. Daniel had dreamt of them conquering the magical world together, Harry the constant rock and support. Daniel had hated Harry's sad eyes whenever they played that game but he hadn't understood why until he was eight and his entire world turned upside down.

"Harry isn't like us."

And he wasn't. Harry wasn't special, he was abnormal – lacked something Daniel didn't understand you could lack. Magic had always come as easy as breathing to him, magic was him. Without magic he wouldn't be anything.

Without magic he would be Harry.

It scared him. Daniel saw the eyes, the distantness in mom's and disappointment and shame in dad's. You weren't supposed to be like Harry who went to Muggle School when Daniel's teachers came to him. To keep him safe. Not Harry. Not Harry who looked exactly like him with the exceptions of the eyes and scar. But now Harry had changed, had grown- had become something more and less than Potter and Daniel searched for the child he had loved before everything went wrong.

When Daniel learned that Harry didn't have magic Daniel had asked why they hadn't given him away.

Shame, it was ugly and it gnawed until there was nothing but desperate anger at the world and at yourself and the pain a constant companion.

Daniel hated that the shame wouldn't go away and he absolutely loathed the flickering envy that blossomed and choked the love when he saw Harry.

Daniel hated that he loathed, loved and envied Harry at the same time.

I will make it right, Daniel swore furiously.

Ace of Spades

"You're bleeding." Daniel startled, lost in his thoughts at the dinner table and the soft sniffing blows of air against his knee made him jerk in place, away from Lupa who yipped and drew back to her master's legs, teeth bared. Daring him. Daniel stared blankly down at Harry who had crouched down beside Lupa to offer her bits of meat from his plate and was now staring at his knee.

"I – yeah, I slipped earlier." Daniel faked embarrassment, turning his head away and dragging a hand through his eyes. He was happy he had worn long shorts and sent a silent prayer of thanks that they still covered the wound. He didn't fancy explaining the deep teeth mark that wouldn't heal with magical ointment. No doubt his volatile emotions had sealed it from healing with magic and that meant it would scar.

He wanted that, the reminder. Harry frowned, straightening with his little mutt curled in his arms, matching collars and suspicious glances. Daniel forced himself to crack a smile. "Quidditch, you know."

"Hn." Harry's eyes were dubious but he didn't press and for that Daniel was very thankful. Daniel watched as Harry cleaned the table and Lupa waved her strong tail happily as Harry poured her a bowl of dog food. Straightening with a stern glance that Lupa returned with doleful begging eyes as she sat carefully beneath the eyes of her master. "You're welcome." Harry said in amusement and Lupa dove in with gusto that sent the dry brown dog food tipping over the edges with an eager nose and tongue hurrying to catch up with them.

Daniel caught that tiny quirk of Harry's lips and translated it into a hidden smile. "Harry?" Daniel cursed puberty as his voice shifted and grimaced. Harry quirked an eyebrow at him, one eye on Lupa. "You know... you know I'm going back to Hogwarts in two days... right?"

Harry did know, Hermione had been very thorough with reminding him of the dates when she put up their working scheme. It was hard to miss as it was, Hermione just made it impossible. Nonetheless

Hogwarts day had always been very important in the Potter family and so Harry just nodded.

Daniel's tongue felt dry and he had to struggle to keep eye contact with the intense almost sharkish eyes of his brother. He felt that if Harry wanted to his throat could be ripped open in a matter of second like a shark smelling blood. It didn't help that he knew that Harry now carried both a knife and gun which he had heard him practice with in the room beside his own training room under the harsh, quick and effective instructions of Mad-Eye Moody. Daniel didn't like Mad-Eye but neither did Harry from what he had seen but he had caught he different tilt in Harry's arrogant shrugs and translated it into something of a begrudging respect.

"Would you," and here Daniel had to swallow thickly, "would you mind accompanying me to the platform?"

There he said it. He prepared for the disappointment, didn't even realize when he broke eye contact and he wondered when the monkey in Harry's ear had gone from gold to metal and how he had missed it.

"I have school." Harry said and Daniel hated how hidden and unreadable they were. He felt a sinking stone in the depth of his stomach and had to force himself to smile as he dragged a hand through his hair, acting casual.

"Oh, well." He lowered his eyes to the floor. "That's alright." He shrugged, tried to copy Harry's perfect nonchalance from earlier and knowing he failed miserably. I won't be seeing him for six months, Daniel thought as he clenched and unclenched his fists, One hour less with him won't matter-

"But I suppose skipping school once in a while is only healthy." Daniel jerked and he couldn't stop his beaming smile for the life of him. I will make this right, his heart tolled with relief. "Aren't mom and dad going?" Harry asked with a sassy smooth twist of his hips as he leaned back against the counter, head tilted in smooth arrogance that Malfoy wouldn't even dream of trying to copy, or could, Daniel thought with an odd sort of twisted pride. Harry could pull arrogance of in ways that would make even Draco stare in disbelief and envy. Harry had made arrogance an art.

"No." Daniel shook his head. "Order business." And he loathed the word. Harry's eyes darkened, dark green eyes turning nearly black with dislike. Daniel pretended not to notice, pretended not to feel the rising envy that a mere reminder could call such an emotional response in Harry.

"Hn." Again, nonchalance was in every flicker and move in Harry's body. "I see." Daniel wondered if he truly did, if he understood that magical wars were different from muggle wars.

Harry wondered the same thing about him as his keen green eyes studied Daniel, mind distant as he thought about the Rwanda Genocide that stole the life of eight hundred and fifty thousand people.

Ace of Spades

Lily was ashamed. The klatch of the slap echoed in her mind hours later and the draining emotions from dark green eyes of her son made her stomach twist and she couldn't sleep. Beside her James snored softly, buried deep in the realms of darkness and dreams and she could see his lips twitch in lazy amused smiles, no doubt reminiscing old pranks and refining them for future use. She could only hope he did not remember whatever he dreamt in the morning, she had had enough trouble for an eternity.

But a lot of it is entirely my own fault. Lily admitted and dark green eyes flashed before her open eyes and she flinched, for a heart beat sure Harry was staring at her with accusing eyes but the image vanished as soon as it appeared. I really screwed this up. She thought sourly, so incredible disappointed with herself and the anger boiled through her veins even as she desperately tried to smother it.

Why was it so different with Harry? So hard to accept him? She'd loved her parents and thought no less of them years after their death despite their lack of magic. She loved Petunia despite her sisters fault and spites and Lily had never considered Petunia just a muggle. Helpless, pathetic, weak.

Lily curled her knees against her chest and rested her chin on them, hand brushing locks of blood red.

"How could you Lily!"

The accusing words of her husband had been a harsh blow and she'd stumbled back as if physically struck as her youngest son ran into the darkness after Harry, desperately calling his name and her hand stung and ached and her heart wrenched with the cold blown reality of what she'd done and said.

"I just wanted to protect our son."

She wanted to scream that she wanted Harry safe too, that if he'd had magic she would have taught him everything she could and she would have been so proud of him as the magical shields and offensive spells flickered into existence, so sad but so proud to know her sons would get through this war together, a united force.

She had read about it in the Daily Prophet, about the expectations and eager whispers about her twin sons. Daniel, meant for greatness after his defeat of Voldemort and Harry who would be just as good as he stood unyielding, a force as unmovable as a mountain in his stubbornness and protectiveness. Lily had seen flashes of those protective streaks when Harry was small, just a tiny toddler cradling Daniel close during a nightmare and fending off bullies as they grew. Harry had always been stronger and faster than Daniel but Daniel had magic. Strength and speed would do nothing against the Unforgivables.

But he can run. A coward of a son, oh how Petunia would laugh. The mockery burned through her.

When Harry was still very young and his lack of magic had just been discovered they had discussed giving him away. It had been a chance unlike any other, a chance to keep one of their beloved sons away from the impending war that would without doubt rise. Lily could deny it all she wanted but she had burned for it, had even suggested sending Harry off with Petunia so that he was still within family for Petunia would never treat a child without magic unkindly. Harry would've been normal and loved for it in her eyes while Lily could barely get herself to look into those eyes that looked so much like her own but shone with a depth of emotion that she never could grasp.

They had contemplated it but James loved Harry and Lily loved Harry too, even if her emotions flickered and hid it and the shame of

it still curled inside her like a nasty worm she couldn't get rid of no matter how much she shook and tugged. James didn't know how to act around Harry but he'd been there by Harry's side when their twelve year old child awoke after being shot, centimeters away from death and not even that – so close, nearly gone.

But Lily hadn't been there, opting to visit Hogwarts where Daniel had broken a leg because of a rough Bludger instead of her oldest son who had come close enough to kiss death. Was it wrong of her? The shame that raged through her? The utter self-loathing?

The fear that never left her and the never ending question that tolled like a bell inside her head.

Is it my fault?

And she could not escape it, the possibility of her blood being the reason that her oldest son couldn't partake in the wonder that was the magical world. That it was her fault that he was captured between two worlds, doomed to never truly fit in either. That her mud blood had torn her son of the possibility of a life with magic.

Do I ruin everything I touch?

The thought was bitter, spiteful and the palm of her right hand rang its mocking toll even as Lily curled into herself and tears splashed down her face and her shoulders shook with an agony and deep wretched fear that she couldn't, wouldn't share with anyone because she was so ashamed and frightened that her heart twisted and stomach knotted in fear of that single world that would ruin everything.

Yes.

And as a wave thick with desperation wavered, threatening to pull her under the dark green eyes of her oldest son would bore into her and he would hate her as he snarled out the four words that threatened to tie a lump of thick and heavy iron to her ankle and throw her into the depths of the sea of agony and never let her resurface.

It's all your fault.

Ace of Spades

"Be good now." Jessica said sternly to Harry, John's struggling form caught by her wrist as he tugged frantically – looking to the world as if he was meeting his doom with wide blue eyes darting frantically for an escape route.

In the driver seat of Sedan Harry smirked, leaning back and propping his feet on the dashboard as Jessica began dragging John towards the Dentist's Office under loud, swearing protests from her charge which drew more than one curiously eye.

Flicking down his silver mirror sunglasses Harry shuffling his back comfortable into the leather seat and drifted off, soon snoring softly.

And as John was strapped into the Dentist chair and Jessica settled in the waiting room there was one girl who caught the curious sight of the Sedan and found herself peering through the darkened windows of the silver car with a smile. Tall and willowy with long brown hair, soft dark honey eyes and a trail of freckles across her nose Katie Bell had been voted as one of the cutest girls at Hogwarts.

Katie was having a miserable day that just seemed to get worse and worse and had ended with her father exploding at her in anger and her storming away feeling hurt. So left on her own to wander muggle London until her father cooled off she found herself drawn to the silver Sedan as the messy black hair of a well known acquaintance caught her eyes.

Katie found herself curious as she peered down at Daniel Potter in the car, looking so adorable sunken back in the seat with his hands in his lap, feet on dashboard and chin against his chest as he snoozed softly. Torn she nonetheless knocked and he jerked awake, turning towards her and blinking with intense emerald green eyes that took her by surprise.

That wasn't Daniel.

Katie stepped back as the door clicked open and the boy slid gracefully from the car, rising to his full height. He was taller than her and looked nearly identical to Daniel but his body was differently built, his eyes emerald green instead of dark topaz, his skin a shade

darker and he carried himself with an arrogance Daniel wouldn't be caught dead reflecting. Katie's cheeks dusted pink as the handsome boy raised an elegant eyebrow with a smirk Katie found insanely cute. How she could have mistaken this boy as Daniel she had no idea, this boy was playing in an entire other league.

"Was there something you wanted?" And his voice! As smooth as dripping honey but with a soothing purr that made her want to lie her head against his chest and listen to it rumble forth from the depth of his chest.

Katie blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "Would you like to go to a date with me?" Harry was caught off guard and he was sure it showed if her further reddening cheeks were anything to go by. "I-I mean-"

"Sure." Harry shrugged. Katie's mouth popped open and she stared mutely down at the offered hand, calloused and strong with dexterous fingers. "The name is Harry."

Katie straightened, meeting his eyes with determination and curling her mouth in a sweet smile. "Katie."

Ace of Spades

"I can't believe you did that!" Katie laughed after nearly choking on her Coca Cola, legs crossed and curled under her chair as she listened with rapt attention.

"Miss Wesley wouldn't stop screaming and it the school had to hire specialist to make sure all the spiders had been removed from her office." Harry told her with a wink. "They were everywhere, crawling and spinning their webs and it was like walking into some kind of horror movie." Harry grinned, sipping on his Sprite.

Katie shuddered. "I can only imagine." She shook her head. "Poor Miss Wesley." Her words said one thing, her smile another. Harry snorted.

It didn't take long for Katie to coerce Harry into taking her to watch a movie; or rather she dragged him to the ticket box and gave him an expectant stare that Harry fulfilled with a dry look. Harry dried to drag her into a romantic comedy (he was a sucker for them) but his

wish was shot down and Harry found himself watching wide-eyed as gigantic monsters tore little screaming human to bits while Katie laughed beside him.

Finding his reactions absolutely adorable Katie curled against him, enjoying the steady rhythmic beating of his heart as he absently laid an arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer.

But, Katie admitted to herself as they left the movie, Harry nibbling on his half-melted chocolate which had been forgotten in his pocket, as steady and fiery her attraction to him had been the urge to befriend him was greater. She glanced up at him, taking in the distant eyes that said so much yet nothing and the rumbling protectiveness he tried to shield from her. He had been just what she needed and she smiled softly as he gazed down at her with keen eyes. "Thank you."

And there was this look in his eyes, as if he knew, and Katie blinked as soft lips pressed against her forehead without a word and her cheeks warmed as her lips pulled into an involuntary beaming smile.

Harry was well back in the car before John returned and Katie waved happily goodbye to him as she mouthed 'call me' with her thumb at her ear in little finger at her mouth. Amused Harry saluted her off.

Sucker.

Harry didn't deny it. Like any other girl before Rosy Rose he was an absolute sucker for begging, sad eyes and Katie's body language had simply screamed at him to pick her up and soothe. John teasingly referred to it as his 'mother hen mode' which Harry had dumped him in a lake for but there really wasn't any better way to describe it. He tried not to let it show too much and Luna's lessons still rang true in his mind but, as she'd said, he was human and people in need of protection made the ground before him a slippery slope.

At the very least he managed to get her to watch a Romantic Comedy with him the second time around. The triumph of the sucker, trickster and the fool. He wiggled in his seat and looked up just in time to catch Jessica tugging a red-rimmed eyed John dragging his

feet behind him with a sour expression on his face as he cradled his chin with a freehand and ruthlessly smothered a laugh.

I am only one, but I am still one; I cannot do everything, but I still can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do.

One Step Forward

"So this is goodbye, huh?" Daniel said, shifting awkwardly with his tiny pet owl Chirp on his shoulder. In one hand he held his trunk; the other was swung awkwardly at his side. He hated the trailing eyes and whispers that the sight of them lured forth in the other Hogwarts students at their families and he itched to turn around and yell at them but Harry looked so unbothered and cool that Daniel couldn't muster up any real will. Instead he stared at Harry and Harry stared back.

Daniel wasn't sure what to do and his mouth curled into a slight frown which Harry picked up easily enough. He cocked an eyebrow, leaning back against the wall and looking for the entire world as untouchable as his eyes made him out to be. "I suppose it is." Harry's smooth voice purred in his chest, unbroken by puberty and Daniel wanted so very much find out how he managed that. Sirius called it the Potter curse – Daniel hadn't liked the look in his eyes.

"Do you know what's up with Sirius?" Daniel blurted out before his mind kicked into action and he bit down on his lips to keep himself from yanking the words back. "And Remus..." Daniel was worried about his godfather. Neither honorary uncles had been the same this summer and Daniel had the lurking suspicion that it had something to do with Harry. If he was directly involved or not, however, Daniel couldn't figure out for the life of him.

A dark amused smirk was his answer and he grimaced. "Right, ask them. I get it." It was a lie, he didn't but he knew better than to try and pry the answer from Harry. His brother could be as stubborn and unmovable as a mountain if he wished so.

"Are you both ready?" Harry turned towards dark rich chocolate eyes and quirked an eyebrow with a blossoming smile which threatened to turn sharkish. "Oh stuff that smirk of yours somewhere its welcome." Hermione huffed, but she was smiling. With a slight hesitance she leant forward and enveloped him in a hug. "I'll keep an eye on him." She whispered lowly in his ears. She let him go,

green and brown eyes dark and serious before they both turned towards Daniel who was watching them dryly.

"Something I should know?" Hermione went bright red and opened her mouth to snap a less than kind reply when Harry draped his arm around her shoulder and tugged her close to her shocked surprise. The soft fragrance of apples mixing with something musty enveloped her senses as Harry pressed her face into his chest.

"Daniel, I fragged your friend senseless during the summer many, many times." Harry said seriously. "She makes the most adorable squeaks when she reaches the peek. I only regret that she cries your name and not mine." Daniel face palmed and Hermione all but died in mortification.

Ginny laughed. "I can see it." She said teasingly, waggling her eyebrows at Hermione as she tugged herself free with a huff. "Anyway, thought I'd come get you. The train is leaving in a minute and we really need to get on it unless you want a repeat of second year." She said sternly. "Try to write Harry or you'll drive Daniel insane." She wagged her finger mock sternly.

Harry hummed. "I promise to reply." He said, dragging a hand through his hair with a shrug.

And that's how far Harry was willing to take it.

The train whistled behind them and Hermione and Ginny hurried off. Daniel lurked behind, hovering uncertainly before Harry. His eyes flickered to his brother's booted feet, up the jeans and the black hoodie over the white shirt which tails could be seen at his waist. He felt a pang, realized he would miss Harry and not knowing how to express it. He didn't dare press for a hug.

Two fingers tapped his forehead and Daniel blinked, catching the wry almost-smile on Harry's lips. "Take care." He tilted his head, lacking the curiosa arrogance and turned on his heel with a wave before tugging on his black helmet with visor as he left for his bike. Daniel's own was had been shrunk and laid safely tucked in his trunk courtesy of Mr Weasley. Letting his eyes linger for just a bit he smiled and hurried towards the train, the twins already waiting to catch and pull on his trunk on followed by himself seconds before the train bypassed the tunnel wall.

Ron had saved them an apartment further down the train and Daniel greeted the people inside with a grin and a wave. Ginny, Hermione, Neville and to his surprise Luna were already there, the latter staring down at an empty piece of parchment with a distant look. Daniel gave her a funny look but decided to leave her be. It didn't take long before he was deep in discussion with the others, Neville hesitantly voicing in now and then.

Daniel was very much relieved but suspicious about Draco Malfoy's absence but he paid it no further mind as he bought himself a handful of snacks to share.

Everything was going well until he saw the horseless carriers. Only they weren't horseless anymore and it took all of Daniel's control to not have his eyes linger, horrified beyond belief by their sickening appearance. Bony black leathery horses with the entire spine standing up sickeningly, trailing off into a whip like tail and large black wings were folded at its sides. It was, however, the eyes that made him want to turn away. Eerie, blank pearl like eyes that seemed to know all yet nothing. The one dragging their carriage stood perfectly still, too still, until they had all settled and it jerked into movement.

They can't see it, and didn't that make Daniel sick. He noted his trembling hands with disgust and clenched them to hide it.

"Thestrals can only be seen by those who have seen death." Luna said, as she touched ink spotted fingers carefully to the parchment. There was a trail of ink on her cheek and on the tip of her nose. Daniel jerked and he hated the knowing look in her eyes. Hermione peered at her.

"Muggles too?" She asked curiously. "I've only heard about thestrals before and the book didn't go wasn't very thorough with the information," it was easy to catch her dislike at this, "but I know there have been speculations of the like through muggle history. Black horses of death." Daniel sat starch white, watching Luna with unease.

"They can."

Sunny... Unbidden that childish nickname for his older brother came to his mind. Harry had teasingly called him Tripper (he'd been unsteady on his feet when he was little – preferring the sky) and Daniel had thrown out the first words that came to mind.

"You're just jealous Sunshine!"

It had been teasing, naturally, between brothers. But it stuck and it had quickly been shortened to Sunny because Harry had been his sun...He made things better when the people crowded around him when they went to Diagon Alley or someone was mean. Harry had been his protector. His sun.

He swallowed his unease and refused to look at Luna for the duration of the trip.

"Don't worry Tripper; I'll keep you on your feet."

Daniel zoned out during the sorting, concentrating on the toad like woman clad entirely in pink smiling falsely out at the surrounding students. Daniel might not be as sensitive as Harry when it came to picking things up but he could pick the blatant dislike from her eyes. Beside him Hermione was frowning while Ron stared at his plate despondently, silently urging the sorting to go faster.

"Well, now that we are all digesting another magnificent feast, I beg a few moments of your attention for the usual start-of-term notices," said Dumbledore. "First-years ought to know that the Forest in the grounds is out-of-bounds to students - and a few of our older students ought to know by now, too." (Daniel, Ron and Hermione exchanged smirks.)

"Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me, for what he tells me is the four-hundred-and-sixty second time, to remind you all that magic is not permitted in corridors between classes, nor are a number of other things, all of which can be checked on the extensive list now fastened to Mr. Filch's office door. We have had two changes in staffing this year. We are very pleased to welcome back Professor Grubbly-Plank, who will be taking Care of Magical Creatures lessons; we are also delighted to introduce Professor Umbridge, our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

There was a round of polite but fairly unenthusiastic applause, during which Daniel, Ron and Hermione exchanged slightly panicked looks; Dumbledore had not said for how long Grubbly-Plank would be teaching.

Dumbledore continued, "Tryouts for the house Quidditch teams will take place on the –"

He broke off, looking enquiringly at Professor Umbridge. As she was not much taller standing than sitting, there was a moment when nobody understood why Dumbledore had stopped talking, but then Professor Umbridge cleared her throat, "Hem, hem," and it became clear that she had got to her feet and was intending to make a speech.

Dumbledore only looked taken aback for a moment, then he sat down smartly and looked alertly at Professor Umbridge as though he desired nothing better than to listen to her talk. Other members of staff were not as adept at hiding their surprise. Professor Sprout's eyebrows had disappeared into her flyaway hair and Professor McGonagall's mouth was as thin as Harry had ever seen it. No new teacher had ever interrupted Dumbledore before. Many of the students were smirking; this woman obviously did not know how things were done at Hogwarts.

"Thank you, Headmaster," Professor Umbridge simpered, "for those kind words of welcome."

Her voice was high-pitched, breathy and little-girlish and Daniel felt a powerful rush of dislike that he could not explain to himself; all he knew was that he loathed everything about her, from her stupid voice to her fluffy pink cardigan. She gave another little throat-clearing cough ("hem, hem") and continued.

"Well, it is lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say!" She smiled, revealing very pointed teeth. "And to see such happy little faces looking up at me!"

Daniel glanced around. None of the faces he could see looked happy. On the contrary, they all looked rather taken-aback at being addressed as though they were five years old.

"I am very much looking forward to getting to know you all and I'm sure we'll be very good friends!"

Students exchanged looks at this; some of them were barely concealing grins.

"I'll be her friend as long as I don't have to borrow that cardigan," Parvati whispered to Lavender, and both of them lapsed into silent giggles.

Professor Umbridge cleared her throat again ("hem, hem"), but when she continued, some of the breathiness had vanished from her voice. She sounded much more businesslike and now her words had a dull learned-by-heart sound to them.

"The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. The rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the wizarding community must be passed down the generations lest we lose them forever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished and polished by those who have been called to the noble profession of teaching."

Professor Umbridge paused here and made a little bow to her fellow staff members, none of whom bowed back to her. Professor McGonagall's dark eyebrows had contracted so that she looked positively hawklike, and Daniel distinctly saw her exchange a significant glance with Professor Sprout as Umbridge gave another little "hem, hem" and went on with her speech.

"Every headmaster and headmistress of Hogwarts has brought something new to the weighty task of governing this historic school, and that is as it should be, for without progress there will be stagnation and decay. There again, progress for progress's sake must be discouraged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering. A balance, then, between old and new, between permanence and change, between tradition and innovation..."

Daniel couldn't help but feel increasingly horrified as he listened to the woman talk and Hermione's mouth had curled into a frown. Even Ron looked faintly alarmed by what he understood and all thoughts

of food had disappeared as he stared at the woman with blatant dislike.

"... because some changes will be for the better, while others will come, in the fullness of time, to be recognized as errors of judgment. Meanwhile, some old habits will be retained, and rightly so, whereas others, outmoded and outworn, must be abandoned. Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited."

She sat down. Dumbledore clapped. The staff followed his lead, though Daniel noticed that several of them brought their hands together only once or twice before stopping. A few students joined in, but most had been taken unawares by the end of the speech, not having listened to more than a few words of it, and before they could start applauding properly, Dumbledore had stood up again.

"Thank you very much, Professor Umbridge, that was most illuminating," he said, bowing to her. "Now, as I was saying, Quidditch tryouts will be held..."

"Yes, it certainly was illuminating," said Hermione in a low voice.

"It explained a lot." Daniel said grimly. "I thought they were over exaggerating about her but this..." He shook his head.

"I get it the Ministry is interfering with Hogwarts," Ron said slowly. "But how much?"

And wasn't that a grim question. Daniel resolved to write to Harry, he was sure his brother would have some kind of advice (Harry had always harbored a strong dislike for the Ministry and especially the Minister, a year or so back there had been a picture of Cornelius Fudge nailed to the dartboard on Harry's door – it had been hardly recognizable after a week). He really should write to Remus and his parents too but he was sure they already knew about the situation... Order business and all. The grown-ups kept the most in-depth information to themselves and shared only what they felt necessary.

There was a great clattering and banging all around them; Dumbledore had obviously just dismissed the school, because

everyone was standing up ready to leave the Hall. Hermione jumped up, looking flustered.

"Ron, we're supposed to show the first-years where to go!"

"Oh yeah," said Ron, who had obviously forgotten. "Hey - hey, you lot! Midgets!"

"Ron!"

"Well, they are, they're tiny..."

"I know, but you can't call them midgets! - First-years!" Hermione called commandingly along the table. "This way, please!"

A group of new students walked shyly up the gap between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, all of them trying hard not to lead the group. They did indeed seem very small; Daniel was sure he had not appeared that young when he had arrived here.

Daniel turned around and that's when he noticed the stares. It felt as if ice had wrapped around his spine and the hairs on his neck rose in ill ease at the whispering and tracing looks judging him from distance. He was used to them, growing up famous how could he not, but this was taking it to a whole other level and the fear... Daniel swallowed, wanting to shut his eyes close and blind himself from them. Don't look at me like that!

He kept his eyes fixed ahead as he wove his way through the crowd in the Entrance Hall, then he hurried up the marble staircase, took a couple of concealed short cuts and had soon left most of the crowds behind.

He had been stupid not to expect this, he thought angrily as he walked through the much emptier upstairs corridors. Of course everyone was staring at him; he had emerged from the Triwizard maze two months previously clutching the dead body of a fellow student and claiming to have seen Lord Voldemort return to power. There had not been time last term to explain himself before they'd all had to go home - even if he had felt up to giving the whole school a detailed account of the terrible events in that graveyard.

Harry didn't need to say anything about the happening of the gun drama, well, other than the Police and Daniel had told the teachers all about the Graveyard. No one had expected Harry to vomit forth the details once he got back to school... Not as far as Daniel knew anyway, and really – Harry wasn't famous. It was Daniel, always Daniel who had to handle the center and spotlight while Harry sunk into the shadows where he strived.

Or was it really the shadows? The Muggle world... what did it truly mean? Daniel didn't know... had never really been a part of it. Hadn't been allowed. He felt his anger drain slightly as apprehension mixed with curiosity. Perhaps... perhaps he should ask Harry about it? Pry for some brotherly information? He couldn't anything about the stares... they were too many but Harry was one person, his brother and surely... surely he wouldn't mind to share. Your world for my world brother...

Daniel blinked back to reality and found his steps leading him up towards the owlery, his mind fixed on one thing only and he was only all too happy to comply. He would write to Harry, he would, because he wouldn't be seeing Harry for six months and Harry had already told him he would reply so as long as Daniel wrote to him...

He quickened his steps.

He had promised himself to fix the mess their family had become and if entrusting Harry with information about the happenings and asking questions about his world was the way to go than that was the way to do it.

Daniel, you're a genius!

It took some time copying down Umbridges entire speech word for word, pausing to recall and scratching in on different parchments to get it just right so that Harry could send him an in depth exploration of it (much as Hermione would do but it was dangerous to only rely on one person and while they were alike they shared many different views and tended to look at things differently... if Daniel had observed them correctly as he joined in the background during their planning of that club of theirs).

Before leaving Harry and Daniel had made up a list of nicknames for the most likely people to be mentioned in letters between the two of

them and he used it to his full advantage. It had been Hermione who suggested it to Daniel when she realized he intended to write to Harry frequently and Harry had agreed with the idea. It had taken them a day to figure every last nickname out but it had been finished and memorized with satisfaction. Daniel replaced Umbridges name with 'The Toad' with a nice swingy 'A new teachers yet again, can you believe it? The Toad-'

I'm worried about Rover; (Daniel couldn't quite hold a snort at the nickname Harry had given Hagrid) I don't suppose you could ask mom and dad about it? I don't know how much you know about Rover, really, I don't think you've ever met but he's about the kindest-

Daniel scrawled quickly, tongue sticking out of his mouth.

Also, if you could send me a book from the family library about thestrals-

Daniel grimaced and a quiver in his hand smeared the ink.

How's the Muggle School? What classes are you taking? Planning on pranking any teachers? I heard about your bet with Tweedledee and Tweedledum and I have only one word: Brilliant. They seem to have taken your words to heart because last time I heard them whispering in that corner of theirs there was muggle phrases involved and they seemed quite intent on challenging you in the future, just to warn you.

He hesitated a second, staring hard at the parchment before writing the last words. They hadn't decided on a nickname for each other. There were so many things they could sign the letters with and know perfectly well that it was meant for them (nicknames were abundant between them). Among many were the popular likening of Harry's name to 'Ari' which was most likely expected.

But at the top he scrawled carefully: Dear Sunny

And at the bottom: Yours sincerely, Tripper.

And then he sealed the letter and sent it off before he could change his mind.

This is how it looks for now after half-an-hour or brainstorming. If you have a better suggestion just email me, this is a rather haphazard list. I tried to make it as... obvious... as possible without making it too obvious. I hope I didn't miss anyone but I don't think so... Anyway, you don't need to memorize it or anything since I'll mention the names involved at the top whenever I take to use them in the future. And, really, new suggestions would simply delight me.

Harry: Sunny

Daniel: Tripper

Umbridge: The Toad

Mad-Eye: Vigilante

Hagrid: Rover

Hermione: Tempest

John: Puppy

Sirius: Star

Remus: Moon

Voldemort: Snake

McGonagall: Mama Bear

Snape: Bat

Dumbledore: Sparkle

Draco: Blondie

Bill: Ice

Charlie: Fire

Fred: Tweedledee

George: Tweedledum

Ron: Glutton

Ginny: Red

Luna: Lyca

Ace of Spades

At best the family teaches the finest things human beings can learn from one another generosity and love. But it is also, all too often, where we learn nasty things like hate, rage and shame.

Notes From Underground

"Are there any particular reason you're trying to pick me to death?" Chirp gave him a reproachful look, dark grey wings folded with neat elegance at his sides as he gave Harry's ear one last nip which pierced the skin and sent a jerk through Harry's hand as instincts reacted to smack the damn thing. Suppressing it he used the motion to flop the cap from shadowing his eyes and peered dryly up at the deceptively innocent owl, façade completely ruined by the blood dripping from its beak. "I do wonder if Daniel is aware that he bought some kind of vampire-fetish owl for a pet." Harry sat up, cracking his back and neck with a groan before flopping out his arm in invite.

Chirp reacted instinctively, settling down and burying his claws into Harry's arm. Harry gave it a stare before rolling his eyes. "I suppose I brought that one on myself." He noted the letter with slight surprise, it was rare that owls delivered anything to him and even rarer that they sought him out in private instead of arriving morning time as owls usually did. It was a first, actually.

It was blank and he untied it nimbly with his right hand. Chirp clawed his way up Harry's shoulder and clipped his ear with a triumphant hoot as he dodged Harry's hand by freefalling from his shoulder down into the forest before sailing away on strong steady wings. Eyebrow twitching Harry stuffed the letter into his backpocket and dropped down to the forest floor.

Ace of Spades

"Miss Bell." She startled, tripping over her own two feet and toppling over the couch with a squeak straight into the laps of Fred and George who looked down at her with mirrored looks of surprise which morphed into wolfish grins. Rolling over to land on the floor Katie sluggishly drew herself to her feet, her sharp glare cutting off any comment not meant for the poor little firsties crowded around the room.

She was tired, exhausted even, and covered from head to toe in mud after wrestling with a particularly nasty Slytherin by the name Belliam River who had exploded after a dry comment from a tiny second year named Lillian who had found him very rude and hadn't been afraid to call him out on it. The poor girl would've been squashed by the six feet tall boy hadn't Katie intervened and now she was bruised and tired because of it.

Didn't stop her smug satisfaction though. Belliam was in the Hospital Wing and Katie had been shooed out after taking four steps inside it by a brisk Madam Pomfrey who gave a wave of her wand and all but kicked her out. Beat spending the night in the same room as Belliam but she had to all but crawl the way up to the tower.

She was tiiiiired.

"Professor McGonagall." The girl turned around slowly, squinting up at the stern woman, imagining for a second that dark eyes shone with sympathy but playing it off as a trick of the light as she all but collapsed on the spot, slouching with mud dripping on the rug. McGonagall frowned and flickered her wand and Katie startled as all mud vanished, leaving only dirty clothes in the wake.

"If you would please come with me." Katie stared in disbelief at McGonagall's quickly retreating back.

Oh thou cruel Law of Murphy! Katie bemoaned as she sulkily shuffled after her head of house. Pleased don't let me be in trouble...

Ace of Spades

"Well if it isn't Sirius Black!" Sirius grunted, sinking lower in his seat as the practically shimmering Rita Skeeter slid into the seat beside him, all proper business with her crocodile green suit and neat white blond hair.

Rita crossed her legs, leaning forward to take in every last detail of him. "Hm." She bemoaned in dissatisfaction. "If only my conscience didn't hinder me I would have the perfect story on my hand to print for tomorrow's paper. The elusive Sirius Black found drunk as piss on a muggle pub in the middle of nowhere way from London without a proper transportation in sight meaning you have magic on your

mind which you aren't supposed to use when alcoholic is drowning those poor brain cells of yours."

She patted his greasy black hair as if he was a dog, not seeming to mind the oily feel to it. "Likening yourself to Severus Snape, are we? I heard you were a fan of his but isn't this taking it a step too far?" She had a light voice, mocking and prying in its tone and deep with smirking knowledge. Sirius grunted an odd snarl, hiccupping into his glass of whisky as he pawed it into his mouth.

"Go 'way." He demanded, giving her a bleary eyed look and grimacing in annoyance as her picture danced double before him and patting the counter for another glass. The barkeeper was all too happy to supply, not seeming to care a ratsass that Sirius was all but tipping out of his chair. It wasn't as strong as Firewhiskey but burned his throat nicely.

"Only James Potter is keeping the Minister from sending your own cohorts scurrying after you." Rita leaned forward with her elbows on the counter, staring at him keenly. "Sad life you lead. Want to share with this poor young reporter?"

"You?" Sirius voice was heavy with disbelief and he snorted. "Yeah, whatever, sure. You pay." He waved his arm, stumbled, but Rita caught him neatly with a strength that her lithe figure really shouldn't be able to portray. Using her right arm to steady him she threw a wad of muggle money on the counter and hauled him out.

"You owe me." Rita patted his cheek.

"Always seems to do." Sirius grumbled as the woman wrapped her arms around him and they vanished with a crack.

Ace of Spades

"Miss Wesley." Harry greeted cordially as he stepped into the classroom. The woman gave him a look twisted between a grimace and horror and waved him to his seat with a visible shudder that made his mouth twitch.

It could be considered cruel, perhaps, on some level but she had been an unfair teacher and she had taken it one step too far when he found Philip Bates sobbing in the corridor after stumbling out

from detention. As far as Harry was concerned she had pulled it on herself and in all fairness he hadn't laid a hand on her body, not once. Psychological damage was more often than not the winner, physical kept them tumbling back. Miss Wesley would never make the mistake to mess with her students again simply because she was angry and needed an outlet.

Harry had suggested she took up yoga to calm her temper but it had been beautifully shot down by flared nostrils and horrified eyes and she looked so convince that he was planning something bad for her and, well, who was he to say anything against it?

Philip peeked up at him from his book, smiling vaguely with a faint wave and Harry quirked a smirk.

Of course he hadn't pulled it off on his own; Philip had been awfully helpful with spider collecting. A hobby of his apparently. Who would have known? Harry thought with a twitch of amusement as Philip tilted the cover of his book to display a large picture of a wolf spider plastered on the front.

Miss Wesley shivered and hunkered down in her seat. She hated spiders, always had, and finding her office in such a way... She still had nightmares and still couldn't relax fully, having half in mind to find the office come flooding up by a sea of black arachnids and it made her tense and cranky as she read through their homework.

And it was all that Potter brats fault. She sneered mentally, grumbling ill words about the boy. He had been strange already as a child, distant, abnormal. Miss Wesley had never liked him and never would and she couldn't for the world of her understand what drew the other children to such a rude and undisciplined child, especially since he made no sign to want them near him at all.

Harry James Potter was an idiosyncratic and Miss Wesley loathed him with all that she was. Hated his smirks, his arrogance, his knowledge and his eyes. God she loathed them. Those knowing eyes that seemed to look right through her and read all her secrets and the dark shimmering amusement as he judged her.

Miss Wesley wondered what lurked in the soul of Harry James Potter but prayed that she would never find out. She didn't like him

she doubted getting a look at what could only be a very twisted soul would change that.

Her hawkish eyes followed his movement as he gracefully slid into his seat and threw his feet up at the table, leaning back in his chair so it was balancing on the back feet of it. She hated the gracefulness of his movements and the wandering eyes from the other children as they peered towards him. To them he was a puzzle something to be admired. She sneered.

She watched him the moments counting down to the bell before reluctantly drawing them away and rising to close the door. The children quieted, watching her with the eyes of hunters waiting to find fault and lunge for it to rip whatever lingering pride that lingered in her body into quivering little stripes. Children were cruel and there was no mercy when it came to teachers.

Miss Wesley had had her hopes in the beginning. Young and intelligent with her blonde hair let loose down her shoulders and blue eyes tracing their features as she smiled kindly. She was smart, she was cool and she wanted nothing more than to be one of those well liked and well respected teachers that everyone spoke about.

And hadn't that gone down the drain?

Like snarling wolves they searched for her weaknesses and tore into them. The first week she had gone home in tears. She requested a transfer, hoping, praying that it was something passing... just this class it was wrong with...

And Beatrice had been so very wrong... so very wrong...

"Roll call." She lifted the first paper neatly arranged on her desk. Potter was the last name on the list and she grimaced when she reached it. "Potter, Harry." He glanced up, stretched a hand lazily through the air.

"Yes." He said it with an arrogance that twisted the word into an entirely other meaning. Here and accounted for but certainly not happy with having you at the front.

"Feet down." Beatrice forced her voice not to quiver, told herself that she wasn't afraid of what this boy could do. He obeyed with a

slowness that made her want to throw something at him but nonetheless did it and for that she gave a mental sigh of relief. Green eyes without a fleck of other color flickered knowingly and Beatrice pretended she hadn't seen it.

"This year," she lifted up another paper, turned it towards the class, "we'll be working with Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland which you have without doubt heard about." She said with a calm that wasn't real.

"Both of them?" Elena Hyde asked with a touch of boredom as she leaned her elbows on her desk and used them to balance her chin in the palms of her hands. Short hair colored dark shadowy gray and gray eyes lined with coal – that was Elena Hyde and it was clear that she shared the thoughts of her classmates. Out! Want out! Freedom!

"Both of them." Beatrice pretended the words didn't sting, pretended that she hadn't chosen the books for their sake and that their rejection didn't hurt. She was invisible, she was, she was! "And you'll be smiling doing so."

There was a round of disbelieving snickers and ribbing between the fourteen and fifteen year olds gathered before her. Beatrice pretended not to see as she bent down and lifted the pile of books while gathering herself together with her back towards the class. When she turned back to them she had slid her mask in place and her face was grim and unforgiving.

She would not let them win.

Ace of Spades

Elena Hyde would be lying if she said she didn't dream of being friends with the elusive Harry Potter. She admired him a lot, envied him for the cruelty he dealt his enemies and for the roaring love he was capable of.

Elena had been his classmate for years and had been there to witness the abrupt change in the boy after the mess with John and had been just as baffled by the change as the rest of them, this sudden topsy-turvy way of his behavior. He went from being the most admired loner in the school to having a kid two years younger

than him tagging along everywhere without any visible complains. It developed.

They were as different as day and night, brothers, and oh how she frothed in her jealousy. But Elena had overcome it. Jealousy would bring her nothing but grief if she tried to get close, she had watched the bear like protectiveness Harry was capable of and it would be foolish to face John with something that could be translated into ill meant.

Harry scared her and drew her, like a moth to flame.

Elena had never even really spoken to him outside class. It was foolish! A fool's dream! So why did her stomach quiver as Miss Wesley called their names together for the group project? Elena cursed it and hid with a smile in Harry's direction. The boy quirked an eyebrow at her but that was it.

Elena felt giddy. Perhaps she would be able to see his house? His room? The thought was enough to make her straighten in her seat with sparkling eyes. When she caught Miss Wesley watching her she sent the woman a blinding smile of thankfulness which was returned by a frown.

Elena didn't care, she had reached heaven.

The end of class couldn't come soon enough and she lingered back, knowing Harry was almost always the last one left since he didn't rush with the quivering stream of kids. Harry was better than that, more mature, just better.

"Harry." Her voice was breathless, light and airy as she hovered beside his desk. The black shoulder bag slid over his front and dropped down to settle at his right hip. He was wearing jeans that hugged him just right with a looseness that could only be translated into oozing sexiness. The tight black t-shirt allowed her eyes to trace his rippling abs and she had to jerk her eyes upwards to keep herself from drooling.

"Elena." Her stomach quivered and she wished she had a recorder so that she could forever save the sound of her name from his lips. "Is there something you want?" There was that cordial distant that didn't let anyone close, pleasant but with a brick wall that left people

rubbing their heads in bemusement. Harry was capable of showing kindness to those he met but his eyes betrayed him. Unlike the rest of the world Elena didn't love Harry's eyes, they left her feeling judged and lost, as if she didn't reach the proper standards. His standards.

"Oh, yes – about the project." Her cheeks blushed prettily red as he cocked his head. His stance and movements screamed arrogance and it was so sexy. She loved a confident man. "I was wondering if we should do it at your house or mine-"

His voice cut her off.

"It's a book." He looked down at her, as if she'd said something stupid. "We got on each, we don't need to read it together, just set up a page side and discuss it in class." Elena faltered, realized her mistake too late. She felt foolish and tears stung her eyes. Stupid! Her mind cried and she agreed wholeheartedly.

"I, yes, of course. It- I was stupid, I'm sorry-," She startled when his thumb brushed away a traitorous tear with a frown, shocked at the feel of his calloused touch of his skin. He had never touched her before.

"Not stupid, distracted." Harry said after a moment, and there was a softening of his expression that Elena would have missed if she wasn't as tuned to him as she was. "Page 50, next Friday?" He stepped back, tugged at the sling of his bag to settle it into a more comfortable position.

Elena nodded, words failing her and he gave her a two fingered salute before vanishing off.

Ace of Spades

Luna contemplated the parchment before her, marked with her carefully pressed fingerprints in just the right way and just the right order. Luna didn't write letters but painted them. A curious smile tugged her lips and she wondered for a moment what Aes would say about it. Would he like it? Praise her?

She rocked slightly on her balls of her feet, silvery grey eyes alight as she gently shuffled it into its envelope, staring at it in silence,

realizing she didn't want to risk it getting lost and not trusting the school owls to find Aes. Too precious, too much time spent on it.

... Luna wasn't sure what to do.

She was... surprised... by this realization. Baffled even. Whimsically Loony Lovegood who always knew what to do could only stare at the envelope in blank bewilderment. Harry meant change, or rather Aes meant change. Harry was Aes, Aes was Harry. Change...

Was it good change?

Luna touched the envelope, seeing before her mind's eye the carefully drawn painting she had spent hours on.

Perfect. Perfect. Perfect.

Luna spied Hermione coming down the hall, eyes lightening. When in doubt seek the books? Luna giggled, couldn't help the quivering giddy feeling inside of her as she skipped up to the girl who was her opposite in everything. Luna had a feeling, a hunch (so new, so new) that Hermione would know.

Humming she made a twirl, skirt flaring around her as she got caught up in the absolute happiness of being Luna.

Ace of Spades

I am a sick man... I am an angry man. I am an unattractive man. I think there is something wrong with my liver. But I don't understand the least thing about my illness, and I don't know for certain which part of me is affected. I am not having any treatment for it, and never have had although I have great respect for medicine and for doctors. I'm besides extremely superstitious if only in having such respect for medicine. (I am well educated enough not to be superstitious, but superstitious I am). No, I refuse treatment out of spite. That is probably something you will not understand.

Daniel read with rapt attention, soaking in the words. Beside him lay the letter from Har- Sunny. Daniel felt giddy with happiness. For the response, for the book – for life as of now. Beside him lay the letter from Sunny.

Tripper,

You go from having teachers wanting to kill you to wanting to take over the school and make it into some Minister territory. Curious. Dumbledore and you will be obvious targets as you will notice, if you haven't already and I warn you from anger as that is exactly what she will try to pry out of you .I sent the book Notes From Underground by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, I suggest you read it.

Sunny

Short, easy and to the point. Just like Sunny (Hermione said to make it a habit to call Harry that both in mind and out loud to keep unnecessary attention be pulled to his forgotten brother). He stroked the backside, reading the words, understanding why Sunny sent it to him.

How far would you go to escape the real world?

The underground man had always felt like an outsider. He doesn't want to be like other people, working in the 'ant-hill' of society. So he decides to withdraw from the world, scrawling a series of darkly sarcastic notes about the torment he's suffering. Angry and alienated, his only comfort is the humiliation of others.

Is he going mad?

Or is it the world around him that's insane?

In many ways the Underground man was his opposite. Daniel often dreamt about being one of the normal people and here were the sarcastic notes of a man who wanted to be anything but. It was as if Sunny wanted to teach him something, everything Sunny did had some kind of reason and Daniel just had to figure out what.

Not only couldn't I make myself malevolent, I couldn't make myself anything: neither good nor bad.

Daniel settled back, propped up his feet and cared not that he was currently missing double potions because Snape was being a right ass and loosing twenty point for not being there was better than the forty that threatened to vanish for him after just breathing wrongly in the vicinity of the bat like man who hated him something fiercely.

For now Daniel decided to do as his brother suggested.

Ace of Spades

"Are you insane or just plain stupid?" John asked in disbelief as he stared down at the exquisite clown suit in Philip's hands. Philip Bates was a Harry's classmate, slightly out of his half of the time and too... restless the rest of it. John had never even pretended to understand him and had kept firmly out of his way.

Apparently he hadn't done a good enough of a job because otherwise he would've been home and not bound to lamppost outside the Bates house. And Harry had already gone home, busy busy, he said, whatever that was supposed to mean.

This left him without his favorite Hero in the world in the grasp of Philip who was clearly insane or the expectant look would have since long gone from dark blue eyes. "Dear god you're actually serious." And wasn't that a dreadful thought.

John bemoaned his fate.

It was a kids party and he was the star of the show. He swore not to set up anymore notes for job searches. Sure he wanted some pocket money but for the price of his pride...? He was so very happy Harry wasn't there to see him, his big brother would have laughed himself silly.

Dressed up in the flowy, flowery and frilly dress with his face painted white with a large red mouth and nose he had to make the most ridiculous picture ever. Worse was that people were getting it on camera as parents took picture of their laughing brats as they climbed over him, begging him for jokes and the like.

John complied as best as he could, making silly faces at the tiny munchkins and exaggerating his speech patterns. If it wasn't for Harry and his ridiculous movie choices John doubted he would have any idea of who Scar was as they begged him to sing Hakuna Matata from the Lion King movie and soon had him out of his clown suit. Imaginative, he gave them that, they soon had his face washed and repainted as Simba.

Swearing to never tell Harry about it John lifted his 'paw' and tapped the karaoke to 'Play' amidst cheers.

He would never admit it to anyone but he actually enjoyed it. The pile of photos from Philip wasn't as appreciated but the quiet boy was insistent.

"Too Harry," Philip said sharply, "he'll understand."

Never mind that the last person John wanted to show the photos to was Harry John grumbly complied, decided that if it was so goddamn important he'd get it over and done with. Shuffling the envelope in his hands John hoped Harry would get them when he was far, far away.

John scuffed his feet against the concrete, shivering slightly in the night air. It was the end of summer and naturally all warmth was drawing away leaving them to suffer through the cold throes of autumn and winter. Not that Harry would see it that way, for some reason his big brother loved winter something immensely and John swore he'd seen Harry pout upon hearing the snow would end.

He tugged his hood up and sighed only to startle when a hand landed on his shoulder. He spun around. Brown eyes, familiar eyes, bore into him. "You're Anthony's little brother." John jerked away, hating those words, what they meant, what they were.

"Not by choice I assure you Varick." John hissed in dislike. He'd seen Varick a lot when Anthony had still been Anthony, they were close friends and John suspected Varick had been as involved with the gang as Anthony. No evidence had sealed that possibility shut.

Varick looked shifty and from the dim light John could make out an expression he had never seen on the other boy's face before. Varick was nervous. His eyes kept darting back and forth before settling routinely on John, as if was the biggest threat at the moment. With his right hand he flickered each fingertip against his thumb, back and forth, back and forth and his knees were bent, as if to bolt.

The neat style of button ups were gone and Varick was wearing a dirty shirt despite the weather and the pale arms looked like they had been scratched raw. Nausea welled forth inside him and he squashed it down.

"What happened Varick?" John tried to make his voice soothing the way Harry did but Varick didn't even seem to register his words.

"You're John." Varick said with certainness. Dark red hair tipped the top of his head in a ragged cut. "You're Anthony's little brother."

"I already told you." John said in annoyance. He tensed when Varick stuffed his hand into his pocket, half in mind to turn around and flee but Varick merely pulled out a ragged ball of wrinkled paper pushing it towards him. John took it slowly, unsurely. "What is it?" He asked, fingering the ball of wrinkled paper but not opening it.

"From Anthony." Varick said, looking lost. "To Anthony's little brother John." He blurted the words, clearly repeated with monotone inside his mind before jerking around and stumbling off, business done and over with.

He left John standing with his fingers locked around the deceptively innocent paper, his mind in turmoil and his heart pounding with fear.

Death is not be trifled with.

I want to know the world

It was plain ridiculous and Katie felt stupid for even agreeing to it in the first place. But what else where there to do but comply like a good little Gryffindor? Someone needs to talk to Miss Johnson. Katie had a feeling this would go straight to hell and she was probably going to be cackling mentally like some demented madwoman the entire way. It was her style.

Bad style.

Katie wanted to wring her hands, bang her head against the closest wall and claw her way into oblivion. This just wasn't her day. Struggling out of her clothes she dumped them furiously to the side and settling herself naked on the side of the Prefect bath she turned on the crane with black bubbles, perfectly content to have it match her mood. The water was just as black, just as moody, but the nifty thing about magic was that it would get her clean despite this. Spelling the light to darken down until her skin stood in sharp contrast with the surrounding Katie dropped down, sinking below the surface.

In the corner of the room a fire sparkled to life and Katie sighed. She should feel relaxed, calm, but her mind was spinning and McGonagall's worried eyes were burned into her mind. She wished Alicia would have been there, it would have been wonderful to have someone to turn to but Alicia was busy living out her life as a high class Quidditch player in her new team and was having the time of her life in Norway if the few letters she'd gotten were anything to go by.

Unbidden her mind wandered to the boy she had met during the summer holidays. Katie wondered what Harry was doing and had itched to ask Daniel if it had been his brother, but something always kept getting in the way and she wondered if she really wanted to find out. Harry was Harry, it felt... nice knowing him as such. Without titles and any real knowledge about each other.

She was enveloped and cradled in warmth. She wished she could have shown the old Angelina but the antisocial, cold girl her friend had become would be a far cry from happy with her interruption. It

was if a cloud of hatred and mistrust had settled in Angelina's soul and the dark skinned girl wouldn't let it go, didn't want to.

It had been an unbelievable cruel thing to tell the school what had happened but Severus Snape had never been a kind man and had cared little as he dragged Angelina clothed in a quilt down the corridor before the curious eyes of fellow students. Once the news of Tobias had gotten out it had been easy to puzzle everything together and stories escalated. Angelina was the only confirmed victim and such she took the brunt of the entire thing, forced to deal with it all on her own. It had broken something inside her.

Harry...

She thought back at the comfort Harry seemed able to call forth with just a touch and a word. The ease she'd felt just by being near him, as if nothing in the world could get close and harm her as long as he was still standing. Something inside her told her Harry would've protected her had a Death Eater popped up around the corner.

It was silly... but Harry felt as if he was created to protect. As if he was there to stand up for those who couldn't stand up on their own. Closed off but reaching out, it was a curious combination. The word she wanted was idiosyncratic.

Perhaps he could help?

It took a second before the thought really registered and Katie all but threw herself from the bath. "I am a genius!" She giggled, snatching up her bundle of clean clothes and impatiently shrugging them on.

She couldn't just waltz up to Angelina and command her to write to Harry but Katie hadn't been close to land in Slytherin without reason. Rummaging through her trunk she pulled forth a parchment and settled herself comfortably on her bed, cross-legged with a book in her lap and the parchment placed neatly on it. Smothering it out she dipped the tip of her feather pen into the ink.

Dear Harry

I suppose the delivery was a curious one but be assured that Duke is a very well behaved and not at all violent owl and he'll be able to find almost anyone by reason. I'm sure you remember me from this

summer, this is Katie and I write to you in behalf of a favor I need to ask you...

Katie wrote down the happenings between Tobias and Angelina and how it had spread through the school in great detail, spared none; she needed to be brutally honest, needed Harry to understand...

You are probably curious why I'm writing to you about this but the fact is that I need help. Or rather Angelina does. She's a close friend of mine and I love her dearly but she has changed. Since names were kept a secret most were spared from the rumors and having the entire school from knowing what had happened to them but Angelina didn't have that. She's not herself anymore. She's closed herself off from the world and I worry about her.

I need your help.

Please write your response back with Duke.

Yours sincerely,

Katie

It took two days before Duke arrived back with a response and Katie all but snatched the letter from her familiar and oblivious to the startled glances around her as she pried it open. In the middle of the paper Harry had written a grand total of five words.

Katie

Count me in.

Harry

Ace of Spades

He was being bombarded by owls.

Thankfully they hadn't taken to swoop down during broad daylight but nonetheless they were there and he currently had five stalkers watching him from the boscage of the forest, yellow eyes wide and watchful. It was unpleasant and it set his sixth sense on high alert,

ringing alarms through his mind which made him twitchy and snappish.

Mrs Anderson had not taken his sharp response kindly, eyes narrowing till slits as she jerked in her seat, as if to lunge for him like some rabid dog. She hadn't called on him for the rest of the lesson and for that Harry silently applauded her.

Counting down the seconds to break Harry resisted the urge to round on the ever watching Elena. He was the first up from his chair and out the door before anyone could really grasp this anomaly. John had gotten the flue and was home for the second day in a row; apparently he'd spent the night out and had turned home late, drenched. He claimed he'd gotten lost, Harry found it very fishy but he wasn't allowed around due to Jessica's orders.

"Use the time to take care of yourself. You need it."

As if he didn't normally.

As it was he couldn't just swoop into the Brown's house, well could, but wouldn't – her word was law in the Browns residence. He moved into the forest, navigating easily through the thick trunks and branches reaching out to snag him. Tiptoeing out of his shoes and pulling his socks off he crouched down and launched himself upwards, snagging the high branch and pulling himself off.

He moved easily, toes and fingers curling as he climbed higher and his back and stomach muscles moving with slim grace as he wormed through. Hoisting himself up on his favorite branch Harry settled comfortably and awaited his little trio of stalkers. It didn't take long.

Harry recognized Duke, the owl giving him a self-satisfied smile as he settled down comfortably. The second was Chirp, the vampire owl eyeing him a searching look for what Harry hoped for the owl's sake was treats. The third was an arrogant looking snowy owl. The fourth was Ron's tiny owl Pig and the fifth Harry wasn't sure was an owl at all. It looked like a cross of a cat and an owl, orange in color with fur like feathers and large eyes.

Reliving Chirp and Duke, Pig and the catowl from their burdens, surprised not to find anything from the snowy owl that was still watching him calmly, Harry pried the first open.

Sunny

I can't believe I'm saying the words but whatever book you gave Tripper it's keeping him out of trouble so keep on sending him more. The Toad is targeting Tripper and Sparkle and the news paper is on her side. We need to do something. Tempest filled me in about the dueling club plans and I'm in, got any more suggestions? I need to do what I can to help, the war is coming and we're ill prepared. I would ask Tempest but she's working herself into an early grave. Try to calm her down? Also, write to Tweedledee- the ass won't up and do it himself and he's driving Tweedledum up the walls.

Glutton

Harry reread the letter, vaguely surprised to find that Ron of all people had asked him for help. Had he made such an impression during the summer or was the redhead just plain desperate? And what about Fred? None of the twins had any real reason to write him that he knew of. Keeping the words in the back of his head to filter for ideas Harry folded the letter and stuffed it into one of his many pockets before picking up the next.

Sunny

Tripper has agreed to what you suggested and Glutton has joined the plans. I will do what you told me to at the end of the week. Try not to get yourself involved in something dangerous

Tempest

Harry snorted, flipping the paper around and digging forth a pen from the backpocket of his jeans. So Daniel had agreed to be the teacher for the tiny defence group and Hermione would go to the elves for help when it came to the question of where the defence lessons were supposed to take place.

Tempest

Shouldn't I be telling you that? Everything is falling into place. Try not to work yourself to death.

Sunny

The third letter was a large black envelope with the print of a hand in sky blue carefully placed in the middle of it. Opening it Harry carefully pulled out a carefully printed paper of fingerprints in red, green, black and blue. Harry ghosted his fingers over it as his lips pulled into a grin. The drawing practically screamed Luna and he resolved to send something back. Shuffling it back he put the envelope carefully to the side. Both Pig and the catowl seemed to realize he wasn't going to call on them any time soon and had shuffled their way into the crowns of the trees.

The fourth letter was from Katie.

Blackbird

Harry cocked an eyebrow.

Yes, that's your name now between the two of us – reason? Don't need one but you should know by now that your hair is black and looks like a bird nest. Easy conclusion. It's also the name you'll be using when writing to Angelina or Eclipse as you'll be referring to her as. Be a good boy and write the letter today, she'll be expecting it.

The white owl,

Harry peered up at the snowy owl.

Is yours.

"Dear god she went and bought me a pet." Harry mumbled, shooting the arrogant looking owl a dry look. She shifted, waddling closer to him now that she had his full attention and giving him an expectant look. Kneeling down he laid his shoulder against the ground and allowed her to shift up and settle. Immediately her beak went for his hair and she set herself to nibble on the strands.

Her name is Hedwig and I expect you'll treat her well.

"Hedwig." He tried the name and the snowy owl paused in mid-chew. "I like it." He told the owl simply, scratching the top of her head and she puffed out her chest. Harry's lips twitched as he read the next line.

She reminds me of you so you ought to get along.

"No problem there I think." Harry said dryly.

Take care of them both.

Katie (you better give me a good name you big softie)

"Softie?" Harry choked out. "I think I'm offended." He rubbed his head, grumbling. "And now I have how many nicknames? Sunny, Ari, Aes, Blackbird... those are the kind ones anyway." He frowned and allowed his mind to wandering back to John, wondering how he was doing. He had a nagging feeling in the back of his head that something was wrong and Harry wanted nothing more than to march into the Browns house and demand answers.

Shaking his head, forehead creasing in a frown he gave sigh and rummaged through his pockets for an empty parchment.

Eclipse

So it would seem that I am finally allowed to write to you in person...

Ace of Spades

John wondered why it hurt. It had been three years since he last saw Anthony in person and the mad dementia had driven away his love and loyalty for the older boy. Or so he'd thought. Did that make him a fool? He'd missed Anthony... it was only natural. John wondered if Harry would be mad at him if he ever told his big brother about his feelings. Harry had nearly been killed by Anthony and John would have been dead hadn't Harry interfered. Anthony was mad, there was nothing to salvage from the monster Anthony had become.

So why did his stomach twist and heart quiver with hope as he stared down at the letter in his hand? He was scared, so scared to see what awaited him in the cell but Anthony wanted to see him. His

mom's worried frown when he got home, her eyes shadowing over as she argued over the phone, made the situation clear and he knew, just knew that she wouldn't be sharing Anthony's request with him. Perhaps Anthony knew that too... maybe Anthony had asked for him earlier but mom had ignored it and he was now growing desperate?

There possibilities were endless and John's heart pounded in his chest, torn between so many decisions. He wanted to see Anthony. He felt crazy just thinking it but it was the truth. He had once loved Anthony; wherever Anthony was John hadn't been far behind, peering curiously with adoring eyes. Pictures deciphered them together; they had been like peas in a pod.

John missed that.

But John had Harry now and Harry was so much more than Anthony would ever be to him. Harry took care of him. Harry was always there for him. Harry protected him, held him and loved him. Harry was family, all he needed wrapped into the neat package of a black haired boy with green eyes. So why, why hadn't he ripped the letter to shreds? Why had he opened it at all? Even if Anthony had gone through a miraculous change he wouldn't be getting out from jail any time soon and John wouldn't be forgiving him for a long time.

John lowered his eyes to the floor, staring hard at his naked feet.

Anthony with his wild bravado and uncaring attitude, so cowardly it almost hurt to watch but so unwavering strong at the same time. Anthony with his messy blonde hair and darkly burning eyes.

Anthony... scared him. Frightened him on a level John had trouble grasping and understanding. His body fought against the grasps of emotions curling in his heart but denial didn't solve anything. Three days had passed since he received the letter and John was still as lost and undecided as ever.

John wanted Harry but for the first time since befriending the older boy John didn't dare to. He didn't know what he would do if Harry rejected him, imagining loving eyes narrowing in disgust. John could barely stomach the thought and the slightest possibility of it becoming reality made him want to hurl.

He sniffed, hugged himself tightly as he closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on anything but his beloved big brother. Either of them. God he was so confused. Anthony is not my brother anymore John told himself firmly. Harry is. Harry didn't deserve to be pushed back in favor of a traitorous bastard who had nearly killed him.

John clenched his fist in his jeans wishing for just a second, a momentary lapse of time, that he had been born as Harry's twin brother and that Daniel had been the one to suffer in his place. John would have been kind to Harry and loved him. They would have been the best of brothers, each others confidants, and Harry would look at him with pride and joy. Twin pranksters with mischievous smiles that would have sent anyone quivering in their boots.

But that wasn't life, not now, and Anthony was his brother and Daniel was a cruel ass that John had hated since the moment the first sneer touched his face in John's vicinity and John realized just who the older boy was directing it towards.

Forgive and forget, John didn't think Harry truly knew the meaning of those words when there was someone trying to hurt someone he loved or someone unable to stand up for themselves. Harry was a self-assigned protector of those weaker than himself and John truly and utterly adored him for it, prided himself with having such a wonderful brother.

Harry would never forgive Anthony. So who was he fooling?

Harry was his brother in everything but blood but Anthony was his blood. He couldn't get away from that connection, couldn't deny the love that still curled in the depths of his heart and it both ashamed and terrified him.

John whimpered, curling up on his bed in a quivering heap of blankets.

Please don't hate me Harry...

Ace of Spades

It had started to rain by the time Harry finished the letter and sent it off, words carefully chosen. He sighed and slouched only to jerk with a start as a sharp pang went through his heart. Squinting through

the torrential rain Harry cocked his head to the side and his fingers curled into the bark of the tree.

Something was wrong. Harry could feel it in the very depth of his soul. His mind jumped immediately to John and Harry felt an icy ill at ease feeling crawling down his spine. Flipping down and landing in a light crouch Harry took off in a sprint. His head was crying and his sixth sense running high wire.

He came to a skidding wet halt with his bike outside the Browns residence, drenched and tense, grumbling mental curses at the sky as he pulled his jacket tighter and hurried towards the door. His knuckles had barely touched the door and before it opened, the thin drawn face of Jessica peeking out at him with deep worry lines. She seemed to freeze when she caught sight of him. "Harry?"

"Where is he?" Harry demanded; his heart an elastic band of ill ease.

"Gone?" Harry felt blank, the exhausted and the drawn face of Jessica was barely registered. She wasn't important, she wasn't John. "You said you'd keep him safe." His voice just a bit too sharp and his eyes churned with darkness. Jessica flinched back but Harry held her eyes stonily. "I was forbidden from coming here and now John is gone. My little brother is gone!" He growled sharply, towering over her hunched form and Jessica's hands quivered.

"I'm sorry." Harry's dark eyes were unforgiving. Wordlessly he held out his hand and Jessica dropped a crumpled letter in his hand. "It's from Anthony... I don't know what it means but I think it has something to do with John's sudden disappearance.

Harry smothered out the letter slowly, anger unlike anything he'd ever felt before burning through him. It rose like a wave and swallowed up his being, made him a terrifying creature. He bared his teeth and let out a sharp snarl as he turned on his feet and marched down, straddling his bike in a smooth determined move. He shot Jessica one last look through the visor of his helmet before peeling out. The letter fluttered to the ground before him, six ominous words soon drenched through, washing the words away.

Remember what I said little brother

Ace of Spades

Harry came to a halt in the middle of nowhere, sliding to a slick stop on the drenched ground. His hands were quivering with rage and his breath came hard and fast. Shifting his attention to the spinning top in his hand, barely even having noticed the rhythmic stroking of his thumb over its smooth surface, Harry blinked dully. It lay innocently in his palm, dull surface gleaming in the rays peeking from between the clouds above. He picked it up with his left hand, fingers curling as if to spin it and his lips twisted into a dark grin.

He felt his heart quickening and palms getting sweaty as he stared down at the deceptively innocent spinning top and the tattoo on his back burned as he slowly placed the tip of the spinning top in the center of his right palm and it sprung to life. Its miniature ridges lightened to life, sending a burst of sharp blue light in every direction as the spinning top began spinning on its own while clicking and folding into an entirely new shape. It swirled and flipped, quivering as it drove deeper into his palm until it drew blood and finally coming to a halting stop, round and smooth to the touch.

In his palm laid a dull golden globe, each detail mapped perfectly with black ridges. His right hand quivered as he slowly tipped it into his left palm and his pupils exploded outwards, swallowing up the entire globe in inky darkness. His fingers closed around the globe in a spasmodic motion, locking them in place as his mouth opened in a silent scream.

The tattoo that really wasn't a tattoo burned to life on his back and the skull in the middle cracked a grin, glorified by the accursed power traveling through its host's body as words from the mouth of a child slithered anew from its mouth to settle beneath it.

"I want to know the world."

All of us have moments in our childhood where we come alive for the first time. And we go back to those moments and think, this is when I became myself.

Child of Death

7 years earlier.

Harry liked watching his family. In particular he liked seeing them happy which was the reason he found himself crouching in the bushes beneath the kitchen window, bare knees buried in dirt and fingers on the windowsill as he peeked through the window. He could see his mother foremost, she was smiling, partly turned towards him, and Harry found an answering grin on his lips as his dad mock wrestled with a half-laughing, half-pleading Daniel as hands roamed his body.

Harry knew Daniel was very ticklish, he had exploited it many times himself, just because he loved seeing Daniel's eyes twinkling. But Daniel had stopped playing with him and had sneered when Harry called him by his nickname. Harry's hands trembled, half in terrible sadness and half in undeniable joy and he couldn't for the life of him wrench his eyes away.

Harry missed his little brother.

He had to duck when mom turned towards the window and he could hear their muffled voices. He waited a few seconds more before daring to peek up again only to find them gone from view. Sprawling down in the earth he worked through the thick boscage to peek out on the backside. He found them setting up for lunch with chicken and potatoes, juice and buns. He escaped before he could hear them call his name, knowing mom wouldn't let him near them looking as dirty as he did and not really wishing to be a part of it, knowing their eyes would change.

Harry hated when his parents looked at him. Their eyes always grew dark and ashamed and he couldn't do anything about it. He tried to be good, tried to behave in school and help around the house but their eyes didn't change. Harry had resolved to stay out of their way as much as he could, Harry could take care of himself. He'd show them he was grown and good, he'd be their big boy even if they couldn't see.

Wiggling out of his sandals Harry began climbing the closest tree. They had a large forest stretching out behind their house and Harry loved it. He wasn't allowed, not really, but he had never let that stop him and as long as mom and dad didn't know he didn't see a problem with it. Harry was good with climbing trees and he could jump between the branches as good as any cat.

There lived magical creatures in the forest but Harry had only ever seen the unicorns and that from a distance. Deer he had seen plenty and he'd even seen a lynx when he'd woken up from a nap in a tree. Harry would never forget that.

Scaling the trees and flying through the air to land clinging and laughing to branches Harry went deeper and deeper into the forest, eyes gleaming as he launched himself on bare feet that had had began turning bloody from where he'd slipped or landed badly on some tiny branch sticking up from the bark. He'd had the bad luck once of finding a nail sticking out of his foot from what had once been a wayward tree house and Harry had never ventured in that direction again. Making his way left Harry came to an abrupt and shocked halt before a clearing and very nearly lost his grip on his branch.

He had never seen anything like it.

The meadow was perfectly circular in a way Harry doubted he could duplicate on a paper and filled to the brim with bluish purple flowers. A sweet fragrance wafted from them, luring his mind and dulling his senses. Slowly scaling the tree to the ground, unable to tear his eyes away, Harry stepped barefoot into the clearing.

In the middle was a dark circular pool of water and Harry could see faint shimmering colors of red and blue beneath the surface. It hypnotized him and he licked the underside of his teeth as he sunk down on his knees before it. His feet were swept with fine powdery blue and purple dust but Harry didn't even notice the creeping numbness as he leaned forward, eager to catch the shimmer of blue and red.

He wasn't prepared for the slim, pale arms rising to catch him by his shirt and drag him under.

Harry couldn't see, the water was too dark and he was being pulled too fast and too deep. He found his legs frozen, unable to kick out and the woman, for she had to be a woman because he could feel his back pressed up against her breasts, had shifted her grip, arm encircling his small body and keeping his arms trapped in a grip he was unable to struggle against.

So Harry held his breath and clutched his eyes shut, hoping, praying, that there would be an end to the tunnel of wet darkness.

He was scared and his chest felt like it was going to burst. His breath escaped him in a horde of frantic bubbles and immediately after felt his body shift in her grip and soft lips pressed against his mouth, breathing new air and Harry's eyes opened in shock to find the sea blue eyes of the woman boring into his own. They were still moving but chest to chest. There was something undeniable soothing about her eyes and for a moment Harry's mind conjured a picture of emerald green eyes looking down at his brother as their mom cradled him. Sea blue eyes mirrored the feelings perfectly with a depth of understanding Harry couldn't grasp or make sense of.

The world came to a soothing lull as Harry wrapped his arms around her chest and felt her mouth press against his to deliver more air whenever the pressure became too much for his chest. He couldn't even see her eyes any longer, everything too dark for his human sight. He buried his head into her chest, seeking comfort in the cold darkness.

The lightly shimmering light came a surprise and Harry jerked in shock when they broke the surface. The woman shifted him, setting him carefully on the edge of a flat rocky surface. He had to squint to see her but her sea blue eyes shone and soft lips pulled into a smile and Harry felt his cheeks warm as she began removing his clothes, putting them aside.

She touched his chest and felt himself warm despite sitting wet and naked with a cold black lake before him and dark tunnel behind him.

"Go." Her voice was soft and fleeting and unlike anything he had ever heard before. He didn't want to leave her but her eyes told him he had no choice. Harry had always been very good at reading people and her eyes urged him. In his lap his hands gave a tremble

but he balled them into fists and nodded his head in determination. The pretty lady wanted him to go into the cave and so he would.

He felt her soft lips against his a final time before she sunk down beneath the surface, leaving him alone to face whatever waited in the other end of the tunnel. His legs had regained their feeling but the underside of his feet was still somewhat numb. And that was perhaps for the best for he could feel the sharp rocks and thorns tearing into them and it hurt without having to feel everything.

He stumbled and fell despite holding on to the wall and his knees were raw and bleeding, he felt the sluggish blood crawl down his legs. Nothing new, Harry had gotten his fair share of scars and bruises from climbing trees and exploring the forest and learning how to cycle but it still stung and he wiped traitorous tears away from his face.

He felt lonely and cold as the woman's strange magic faded of strength. He wanted to go back and call for her but determinedly plowed forward. He was a big boy, he was strong.

A whisper threaded the darkness, silent and luring like the wind and it called his name. "Harry..." He heard it whisper and it sent his heart into a frantic pounding. Something invisible settled around him, pulling him close and cradling him. In his mind tolled darkly ringing bells and cold breathe against his neck sent shivers down his back.

"W-who are you?" Harry whispered, feeling so safe yet so scared at the same time. The voice chuckled but he couldn't feel the rumble of a chest, only black material as soft and sweeping as water but neither cold or warm. The air felt chill yet warm, so opposite in its all.

"I am in all and everything my child." Harry felt something soft brush his chin but it didn't feel like skin, more like soft bone. "I am Death."

"W-what?" Harry stammered.

"Such an adorable creature you've turned out to be my child. You fill me with such pride." Harry found himself lifted and cradled against the skeleton in black cloak and stared into the blue flames of Death's eye sockets. "You are old enough to understand it now, my child, if you wish to?"

"Yes." Harry breathed out, feeling safer in the arms of Death than he had ever felt in another's.

"So eager my child." Death chuckled and made Harry's heart blossom with warmth. Death began walking deeper into the cave and Harry encircled his arms around Death's shoulders and pressed himself closer. "I shall tell you a story." Death told him in a voice lulled with soothing warmth. "I shall tell you the story about a child, my child. I shall tell a story about you."

"About me?" Harry asked in wonder. "I'm your child?" The concept was odd and foreign and hard to grasp.

"Indeed." Death said softly. "Yet you are not my child by blood, for how can that be when I have none?" Harry stared at him and Death stared back with twin flames of blue. "I feel every presence of those that are born, my child, and I see their destinies in their souls. Your fate was both cruel and unfair. I saw myself reflected in your eyes." Death sighed, and he looked so old and weary now that Harry's eyes had gotten used to the darkness enough to see Death's skull. "I am not allowed to change the paths of human life but I couldn't leave you to face it on your own so I stayed by your bedside to the night of Halloween." Death sighed heavily and looked down at him, flames flickering dark blue. "You know how cruel humans can be."

It wasn't a question but Harry answered anyway. "I know." He said, thinking back on the magical people who sneered at him, his mom's shadowed eyes and dad's disappointment, his brother's sudden cruelty and his godfather who tried to be there but always chose Daniel before him no matter how good Harry tried to be. He would never come first, he wasn't meant to, not in their eyes.

"I saw your life as a sacrificial lamb." Death said heavily. "Your soul torn even for one so young, drained of emotion and shaped to be a sacrifice for light's victory. You were never meant to live." Death's voice grew dark and the flames in their sockets so dark they were nearly black. "It is too cruel to put in words, what they would do to you my child. And I counted the days to Halloween when your life and your brother's life would forever be shaped. But I could not let it happen." Death shook his skull. "I broke my own laws, I interfered."

"My magic." Harry whispered in realization. "You took my magic."

"Yes." And Harry felt that Death was smiling down at him. "Yes, I took your magic but a child born with magic isn't supposed to survive such a thing, their bodies can't handle it. So I imprinted myself on your soul and made you mine."

Death stroked Harry's chin with gentle bony fingers. "What does that mean?" Harry asked curiously.

"That is for you to decide, child." Death said softly, lovingly. "Today I will allow you to make a wish."

"A wish?" Harry's eyes widened.

"Yes child, a wish. You can ask me for anything but-,"

"My magic. I can ask for anything but my magic back." Harry stared up at him with large imploring green eyes.

"Such intelligence..." Death whispered. "You do not need to ask me for anything at all, child, for know that each wish has its backside and you might not like the consequences."

"What do you mean?" Harry furrowed his eyebrows in an expression that Death found utterly adorable.

"Imagine you asked me for immortality," Harry made a grimace and Death chuckled, "I see I'm safe from that wish. But imagine being alive for hundreds upon hundreds of years, forever never changing."

"I'd watch everyone die." Harry said after a moment of thought. "And I'd be so alone."

"Correct." Death said, flames burning brilliantly. "Immortality will never be anything but a curse in this world." Harry took those words from someone living it and nodded in all seriousness the eight year old could muster. His face went thoughtful but unsure and he opened his mouth to ask something, but shut it before it could form. Death knew the second the thought was formed and stroked his black hair. "You wonder about your brother."

"I do." Harry stared up at him imploringly. "Why did Voldemort come for him?" Harry wanted to know. "Mom and dad won't tell me and they won't tell Daniel either."

"Do you know about the prophecy made about your brother?" Harry shook his head. "I shall tell you then for it is important. Child, I would like for you to try and memorize it. Can you do that for me?"

Harry nodded seriously.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies ..."

Harry felt an icy feeling settle in his stomach. "W-what does that mean?" He swallowed, his throat suddenly dry as the words burned into his mind.

"That your brother is destined to kill the Dark Lord Voldemort or Tom Marvolo Riddle as he was born as. Or die trying."

"I..." Harry didn't want to believe it but Death made it impossible to believe anything but. "He'll be killed!" Harry burst out horrified. "They'll kill my little brother-"

"They won't." Death said with such conviction that Harry faltered. "For as long as you live, they won't."

"I don't understand." Harry said hopelessly. Death stroked his chin and bony lips pressed against his forehead in the illusion of a kiss.

"You aren't meant to." Death stared down at him warmly and Harry found himself entranced.

"I like your eyes." Harry said suddenly. "They're blue and I like blue and they're fire and I love fire."

Death laughed. "Is that so?" Harry nodded, completely honest. "Hm, you're such an odd child. Odd but utterly adorable." Death paused and the flames flickered with intensity. "Such an odd wish you have there child."

Harry startled and looked up. "Can you do it?" He asked curiously.

"Anything but your magic." Death said softly. "I can give you anything but your magic. But the backside of your wish will be a hard one, painful to the point of insanity. I cannot store all the information about the world inside your head, it would break you and the world is forever changing. But child, I can give you an instrument and the mark to use it." Death closed his spidery fingers and when it opened them there laid a dull golden spinning top in his palm. Harry stared at it entranced and his hand reached out to touch it but Death pulled it out of his reach. "Are you sure about your wish?"

They both already knew the answer but Harry answered aloud with clear confidence. "Yes." He said, and as tiny as he was he looked so old in Death's eyes.

"You grew up too fast." Death said mournfully. "I shall allow you to touch this now but then you will have to wait until you're older or it will drive you insane."

"How much older?"

"Four years."

"Then, then I'll be twelve." Harry asked for confirmation and Death inclined his head in agreement. "Do I have to wait four years after that too?"

Death was silent for a second; peering at him intently and Harry wondered if he was reading his soul. "I would say yes but I know already that you won't obey by it. Three years. Then two. Then one." Death said slowly. "Those are the years I implore you to consider between each use."

"You said there would be a mark." Harry said after a moment.

"The mark of Death, the Ace of Spades." Death said softly. "You won't be marked until your third use for the first two times you shall come here to me and I shall work as your conductor." Death's voice left no room for arguments. "The third time you hold the spinning top in your hand the mark should form on your back and it will become forever a part of you by your third use. Until then I will keep the spinning top here."

Harry's heart was pounding as Death brought the spinning top once again towards him. "Hold out your right palm." Harry did as told and Death pressed the tip against his palm and bony fingers curled as if to spin it. "As cruel as it is be careful of its addiction." Death warned but Harry could barely hear it above the pounding in his head. "Tell me your wish, child." Death's voice was like honey and his tongue whispered forth five words that would forever change his life.

"I want to know the world."

The spinning tops miniature ridges lightened to life, sending a burst of sharp blue light in every direction as the spinning top began spinning on its own while clicking and folding into an entirely new shape. It swirled and flipped, quivering as it drove deeper into his palm until it drew blood and finally coming to a halting stop, round and smooth to the touch.

In his palm laid a dull golden globe, each detail mapped perfectly with black ridges. His right hand quivered as he slowly tipped it into his left palm and his pupils exploded outwards, swallowing up the entire globe in inky darkness. His fingers closed around the globe in a spasmodic motion, locking them in place as his mouth opened in a silent scream as information upon information flooded his mind, threatening to destroy it.

He saw the people of the earth, their lives, dying people – sometimes violent, sometimes in peace. Watched as newborn children breathed air for the first time to be handed to loving, hating, disappointed, apathetic parents. He saw war and its cruelty tracing back years upon years. He saw siblings, the love, the hate, the disgust. He saw lovers and broken hearts. He saw periods of time, woman's oppression and clothes unlike anything he had ever seen. He saw Einstein and Shakespeare, Jean de Arc and old rulers. Saw animals driven to instinct and false witches and wizards burned on stake, screaming as their flesh melted off their bodies. He watched the revolution backwards, saw the dinosaurs, saw the big bang and-

Then there was the information, much which he failed to grasp but jumbled bits of information forever ingrained into his head. Of math and science and magic, or languages and people he had never met. Saw Dumbledore and Grindelwald, their love, their hate, their

destruction. Saw his parents love and disappointment and he saw himself, a magicless disgrace.

And then it was all gone, the sphere refolding into a spinning top to be enclosed in Death's hand as he cradled the boy, his child, close as Harry sobbed harshly into the black folds of Death's robes, wailing with the pain of thousands and struggling to hold onto the love and warmth he had witnessed. And Death soothed his distraught mind in the way that only Death could, enveloping it in the illusion of sleep.

Now.

Harry hated the burning yet he loved it to the point of addiction. He loved the illusion of power the sphere brought him; the knowledge that flooded his mind was a matter of grasping straws. Harry focused all his attention on John, saw for the second time the first ten years of his little brother's life and then the enfolding three years that had passes since his last use. He felt the adoration and love, the brotherly affection and deep sating wish to make Harry proud. Harry screened past it, feeling like an invasive and unwelcome force as he scrolled to the last matter of days. Saw the note, felt the fear, and heard John's wish in an echo...

"Please don't hate me Harry..."

Hate him? The idea was impossible to comprehend. Harry wasn't capable of hating John for John was his everything.

The information flickered and careened as millions of thoughts bombarded him, tearing at his frail sanity with pleas and wails for life and life without pain. Felt the hatred of thousands threatening to consume him. Saw himself with his mask of arrogance and insatiable love for apples and tore away before he could see more. Saw tiny Rosy Rose as she'd been when she was still whole, beautiful with her cascading red hair and loving blue eyes, and saw the men tear her apart with rough thrust and leave her as she was now, broken and hollow eyed, forever marked.

Harry hadn't even noticed falling to his knees until the sphere fell out of his hand to land on the ground once again as a spinning top as he reached to clasp his head, bloody tears slithering down his face to land on the ground to be washed away by water as the darkness

retracted from his eyes. He remained so for what felt like hours before managing to pull himself up on unsteady legs. The emerald green color of his eyes had darkened further with lingering flecks of black slowly siphoning into it to become a part of old black spots that would enchant his eyesight further and allow him to grasp more of what others couldn't. In the black spots the ability of the spinning top remained and Harry's lips formed a grimly triumphant smile.

Harry knew where John was.

May we be fearless... from friends and enemies...from known and unknown ... from night and day...May all the directions be our allies.

Allies

Hermione didn't have time to react. Rounding the corner she felt strong wiry arms grab hold of her and her wand snatched from her grip before the same hand slammed over her mouth to smother the building scream. He was strong, much stronger than her, and she felt like a child in his arms as he easily dragged her along to an empty classroom and threw her inside. The familiar feeling of wards settled around them before he finally rounded at her and she found his furious grey eyes drilling into her own.

The handsome burly Slytherin was one she had only seen in passing but knew the name off. Lawliet Rosier; much admired with his lean muscled body and sleek dark brown hair. Hermione had heard the muffled laughter and whispers from Parvati and Lavender during late hours. Hermione knew he wasn't someone to be trifled with; his father was a well known Death Eater and Lawliet was probably right next in line.

"Is it some twisted righteousness or cruelty that drives you Granger?" Rosier hissed furiously as he grabbed hold of the front of her robes and pulled her to her feet, pressing her harshly against the stone walls of the castle. He was much taller than her and her toes barely touched the floor as he held her with an effortlessness that was quite frankly terrifying.

Hermione narrowed her dark eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about Rosier." She snapped, knowing better than to twist in his grip. He had placed his fingers in a way that made it easy for him to drive them into her throat. He hadn't bothered with her legs, Hermione supposed he didn't think her stupid enough to try and knee him in the groin. The door was locked, the classroom soundproofed and she had no wand. Her mind worked furiously.

"Don't play coy with me, Granger." He had a rough rolling voice that demanded attention and promised retribution if you didn't listen. "I've heard about your little club, your little dueling club for all the little precious lions, badgers and ravens." His eyes looked impossibly dark as he leaned closer, teeth bared in a snarl. "What I want to know is why the Slytherins haven't been invited."

Hermione jerked in shock. "What?" She demanded. "Are you stupid or something?" Before another word could get out Rosier had shifted his grip and Hermione's eyes widened as a hand trapped her throat and tightened painfully, roughly cutting off her air supply.

"Perhaps you are the one who's stupid, for all your infinite wisdom Granger." She didn't dare to reach up to grab the hand around her throat, settled for glaring darkly at him as she fought to get a sliver of air. Rosier snorted in disgust and relaxed her grip, allowing her to inhale much needed air while glaring at him darkly. "I know your little golden trio have unsettled business with Malfoy and his little cronies and the Quidditch team as well, but is that enough to judge an entire house on, hum?" He dragged rough fingertips along her cheek, his eyes never leaving hers.

"The Slytherin house is filled with wanna-be Death Eaters, more so than the others. You have your secrets, closed off from the others. And what's to say you purebloods were going to listen to a puny little mudblood like me, hum?" She mimicked with a dark smile. "It's a matter of safety, you see." She mocked.

Lawliet narrowed his eyes, keen with intellect as he slowly travelled his eyes from her eyes down to her toes and up again, leaving Hermione feeling very much exposed. He smirked as he met her eyes again. "I think," he murmured, leaning so close Hermione could feel his warm breath playing across her lips, "we can make a deal, if you'd take a moment of your time and listen."

"Release me." Hermione said slowly. "And I will listen to what you have to say."

Lawliet smiled, revealing a row of gleaming white teeth. "I have no doubt about that." And something in his eyes warned Hermione that he would have made her listen no matter what her personal opinion might be. He let her go abruptly and only reaction kept her from collapsing on the floor. Glaring and rubbing her throat she took her place neatly at the table he gestured her towards.

"So you want me to allow you and the other Slytherins into my dueling club." Hermione studied him keenly, folding her arms across her chest and leaning back in her seat. "Convince me."

Lawliet threw his head back with a rumbling laugh. "You want me to convince you mudblood?" The humor in his eyes was dark. "Oh, my father would kill you on the spot. Not a word more would be heard from your filthy mouth if he had his way with you. But I am not my father... lucky you." He copied her position with an arrogant tilt of his head. "Very well. Listen closely my dear, for what you're about to hear will turn your world upside down." He leaned forward, elbows on the table. "You see, there's a good portion of the Slytherins that don't wish to join either the side of the Light or the Dark, rather they wish to join the side of your dear little leader."

"My little leader? What do you-," Hermione's eyes widened, completely caught off guard as the words dawned. "You mean they want to join up with-," She couldn't utter the words, couldn't get them out. She was completely astounded and Lawliet's eyes told her he was very much amused by it.

"Yes, we have all agreed that joining Potter," he grimaced, looking pained by the idea but plowing on, "would be the better course of action." His eyes flickered; cutting her off before she could begin. "Just listen." He said softly, in a way that Hermione couldn't just say no and plow past.

She sighed. "I already promised I would."

"Good." Lawliet's eyes flickered towards the window behind her, dark and thoughtful. "There is more than enough examples for why we shouldn't join the Dark Lord's side." Lawliet said after a moment. "I, for one, do not wish to follow a maniac who tortures his followers and considers them disposable. It is the Light, I would think, that confuses you. Why would I, we, not want to join up with the all mighty Albus Dumbledore, the only person the Dark Lord has been known to fear?" Lawliet tilted his head. "It's simplicity in itself; we do not wish to be turned into pawns."

Hermione studied his expression for a moment before flickering her eyes down to her hands. Dumbledore was powerful but he had his faults, it came with being human. She had had long discussion about his very subject with Harry during the summer and when she once would have risen in immediate defence she now sat still, thoughtful and surprised by her own understanding of the subject.

Dumbledore had never done anything to promote interhouse relations. He allowed Snape, the head of Slytherins, to do whatever he wanted with the students, even when it would've been counted as torture by the laws of Muggle Britain. Snape favored the Slytherins and openly mocked the students of Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and in particular Gryffindor. Had Hogwarts been a muggle school Snape would've been long gone. Hermione could only imagine the file of complains in Dumbledore's office but he was so caught up in keeping his spy that he couldn't see that Snape was ruining future generations. As Harry had told her, there had been a drastic decrease of Aurors and Healers since there were so few who got to Snape's N.E. class, nonetheless passed it. Snape wasn't a competent teacher, no matter how good a spy he happened to be.

The other teachers played a lesser roll but nonetheless it was there. The other head of houses managed to be fair to a point but all played favorites and Slytherins were almost always those to be considered guilty first. If a fight was started, suspicious eyes turned to the green clad students and so it had been since Voldemort rose to power. You'd think fourteen years later would've lessened the ire but if anything it had only grown.

But at the same time the Slytherins weren't completely guiltless with their pureblood propaganda. Hermione was considered a lesser being by nearly the entire house, it was hard to forget and get away from. Hermione had all the good reasons to hate them but she didn't.

"They're all still human beings. We all hate something, it is a sad fact. Don't hate them; pity them, for they aren't even able to form their own opinions but goes with the racisms from age old generations."

Harry's word echoed from the depth of her mind and her lips quirked into an involuntary grin and she shook her head to clear it before glancing up at Lawliet who had watched her go through a myriad of expressions with interest.

"Would it surprise you if I said I understand perfectly well what you're talking about?" Hermione said with a flicker of amusement as she caught a glimmer of shock in his eyes. "I know Dumbledore tries not to play with people but it's ingrained into him and he slips. Slytherins would be considered perfect and disposable pawns because of your background in dark families and several of you would be recruited as spies." Hermione tapped her temple with a

smile. "But Daniel, here you have someone who have escaped Voldemort four times and survived the death curse at that. He's strong and getting even more so, you can all see that. And he's not the kind of person to play with lives."

"I should applaud you Granger." Lawliet smirked. "I think you got it all down."

Hermione cocked an eyebrow. "I understand the reasons but why should I believe you?"

Lawliet's eyebrows rose in surprise before he chuckled. "You would have done well in Slytherin Hermione. I think we're going to make a great team."

"Convince me." Hermione challenged him with a smirk and glimmer in her eyes.

Ace of Spades

"John." Anthony's voice was calm, eerie, and lacking the warmth John remembered from his childhood. They sat facing each other across a table, Anthony with one leg folded neatly over the other and blue eyes boring into him. John wanted to tear his eyes away but he remained stubbornly still, he had made the decision to come – he would see it through, hear him out.

No matter how much he wanted to tear out of the room and throw himself into the hopefully waiting arms of Harry to be hugged close and comforted he would stay.

This is my decision. John thought as he gathered his nerves together. "Hi Anthony." He wondered if he imagined it but his voice felt weak and frightened and he had to clear his throat before he continued. "I got your note."

"Indeed." Anthony's lips formed into a mocking imitation of a smile and John felt a shiver crawl down his back. "I heard you have it well." Anthony said after a moment, studying him keenly with eyes so dark and blank that John wished to reach forward and flicker on the lamp in the dark caves.

"Yeah." John fiddled with his shirt. "Harry-"

"Yes." John jerked backwards, shocked by the venom in Anthony's voice. "Your new brother." And what could John say? He would never deny it, Harry meant too much for him so he remained silent and watchful. Anthony slammed his hand down on the table with a furious snarl. "How can you be so calm! You're not even denying it!" Anthony rose and the chair fell behind him. "He ruined our lives!" Anthony hissed furiously.

The fury snapped through him like lightning and he was on his feet before he could fully register it. "No!" John snarled. "YOU ruined MY life!" John clenched his fists. "I would have been dead if it weren't for Harry and you would still have been in jail!" He shouted.

He didn't see the movement but felt the fist slam into his cheek and his head slammed sharply against the wall with a loud crack that colored his vision black. Anthony grabbed the front of his shirt and hauled him to his feet and the madness in his eyes were as clear as it had been three years earlier. "You traitor!" Anthony slammed him back against the wall, again, and again and John cried out in pain as he was thrown front first into the table. He heard before he felt his ribs snap and agony shot through him.

Vaguely he could hear the door lock click into the place and through the haze John felt dread fill him as he realized he was alone and no one would come. He prayed for Harry, prayed for forgiveness.

"I am going to kill you." Anthony stated calmly as he hauled John up and slammed him down on his back. "I am going to finish what I started and when you're dead I am going to kill Harry and everything is going to be fine again." He smiled widely, eyes glittering. "But first, I'm going to make you scream."

Ace of Spades

Harry forced the bike faster, sliding and winding past cars. He crossed red lights and snarled as people got in his way. Curling his hand he forced the bike into top speed on the wet slick road towards the prison, cursing all and everything. What made you go there? Harry wondered desperately. He had been so sure John had only taken off to think, to wonder, to question. Please be alright...

He came to a skidding halt, throwing his bike to the side and the helmet landed on the ground seconds behind as he speed towards the entrance of the prison. It was dark outside and the guards gave him suspicious glances when he came skidding inside, drenched from head to toe. "I need you to take me to room 213." Harry said immediately before they could open their mouths. "My little brother is up there and I need to get to him now."

"Look, kid-," Harry snarled and his body jerked, as if to lunge for the guard but he managed to rein himself in.

"NOW." He growled furiously, hand twitching and he glanced frantically into the prison.

But the guards had caught sight of his gun and were drawing their own. "Look, you need to calm down kid and allow us to take care of you." The same guard, an elderly gentleman, hushed – holding up a hand as if to calm him like some wild animal.

Harry's eyes narrowed into slits and with a twist of his feet he was through the metal detector and off, leaving the machine ringing frantically behind him. He hears shouts and had to dodge the grabbing hands of other guards but Harry was fast and agile and angled his body just right, skidding and sliding, jumping and climbing and taking the stairs in three steps. His heart pounded frantically and the sight of John sprawled on the table with blood dripping from his head was burned into his retina. It was like facing an age old nightmare but so many new feelings that he couldn't properly sort them.

His memory led his steps, counted the guards, and made his body move fluently. 207, 209, 211, 213-

Harry's slammed his elbow into the guard's face, mashing the look of enjoyment into one of shock and pain. Harry could hear the screams through the door and relief washed through him. He's alive, he's still fucking alive-

He slammed his shoulder against the door, again, and again. He growled and backing away from it and using the opposite wall as a sort of launching pad he slammed his entire weight against it. He felt his left shoulder snap but his adrenaline filled body was blind to the

pain as he stumbled inside, dark green eyes ravaged with rage seeking out the object of his hatred.

Anthony's surprised eyes met his own, so like John's yet nothing like them, and Harry used the momentum and surprise and lunged himself across the table to slam into him, sending them both sprawling to the floor. The knife in Anthony's grip slipped from his grip as Harry wrestled him down but slick with blood that wasn't his own Anthony managed to knee Harry in his solar plexus and his hand reached for the bloody knife.

Gasping for breath Harry managed to hook his arm around his throat and pull him backwards but Anthony's hand had already closed around the knife and the movement enabled Anthony to drive it into his stomach. Blood welled up immediately but Harry refused to let go, pressing harder and harder. He felt Anthony struggle above him, felt the knife bite into his thighs and sides, felt Anthony flounder and was unable to prevent it from digging from shoulder to hand as Anthony flapped like a fish on dry land. Teeth clenched shut he didn't release his grip until Anthony's lips were blue and he finally stilled, eyes bulging in their death.

Breath shaky Harry let him go and pushed the dead body away in disgust. The gentleman guard was staring at him shakily; gun drawn and directed at Anthony's still body but Harry only had eyes from the shaking, bloody body of his little brother. He reached out with shaking fingers, praying for pulse and found it weak but there and it very nearly sent him sagging to the floor in relief if one of the guards hadn't caught him and hauled him upwards. He heard the calls for medics but his hearing didn't seem to be working properly and he was losing too much blood too fast. Black spots ate his vision and swallowed him up.

The body of Harry James Potter stopped breathing in the arms of the frantic gentleman guard.

Ace of Spades

How did it come to this...? Lionel wandered where he sat in the Hospital waiting room, waiting for the news of the boy he'd been so convinced were some insane convict out for revenge but turned out to be some otherworldly kid frantic to save his friend's life. How the hell he kept going looking as he did Lionel would never understand.

All that blood... it was shocking he hadn't blacked out earlier. Lionel had counted fifteen stab wounds, not to mention the boy's left arm that had been pretty much gutted.

He grimaced. The skin had flapped open and the prison medicals had haphazardly stitched it together with black thread to even keep him alive long enough to get him to the hospital. He's a strong kid... Lionel thought, if not a bit frantic. He'll survive... He sighed, recalling the wild dark eyes of the boy shimmering like emeralds as he held steadfast to the older, writhing boy. Lionel couldn't fault the kid for doing what he did, the state of John Brown (they had found an ID in his pocket) had him horrified.

Carefully mapped knife wounds spelled out traitor on his chest and back with a careful precision that could only have been made by a sick psychopath. Practically his entire upper body had been ruined as he slowly bled to death on the prison table. He was in better condition than his older friend but it was going to scar into a reminder Lionel doubted anyone wanted.

"Are you Lionel Watson who brought in John Lyall Brown and Harry James Potter?" Lionel who had been deep in thought stood up automatically; ready to salute at the call of his name. The doctor smiled kindly at his haggard appearance. "Mr Brown was put in a private room earlier and his mother arrived some minutes ago. She gave us the name of the other boy but we haven't yet reached his parents." The doctor explained.

"Are they going to be alright?" He asked, exhausting clear in his voice. It was seven AM in the morning and he wanted nothing more than to fall into a deep sleep.

The doctor frowned and sighed. "Physically both should be alright but this is bound to leave some mental scars. Apparently Mr Potter is the same kid that interfered three years ago and got shot twice in shoulder and chest." The doctor shook his head. "There's going to be some nerve damage, especially in his left arm which had been sewn shut and he's going to have some difficulties using it in the future and he's going to need close observation the first week to make sure there's no internal bleeding but he was lucky, the stab wounds didn't go deep enough to cause heavy permanent damage."

"And that's good?" Lionel asked for confirmation.

"It is, better than we expected when you brought him in." The doctor agreed with a smile.

"Can I go visit him?" Lionel asked after a moment. "You said you hadn't reached Harry's parents...?"

"Of course, but he's still unconscious and is likely to remain so for some time." The doctor smiled in sympathy as he briefed Lionel on the directions before vanishing off to check up on his other patients.

It was with heavy steps the ex-marine made his way to the boy's room. He felt guilty for following the rules, wasn't that the reason he quit in the first place? The panic and hurry in the boy's tone should have sent him rushing but instead he tried to calm him, like was some sort of animal. And when he saw the gun... well, it was already too late by then. Working as a prison guard brought a load of shady people past his doors.

He opened the door, slipping silently inside. There was a nurse beside the boy, carefully checking the machines and she looked up startled at him. "Are you his guardian?" She asked, turning fully towards him with a critical eye. Her name was Alice Creed; Lionel took mental note of it after checking her sign.

"No, I'm one of the prison guards who brought him here." She swept her eyes up and down his body before nodding. She was young with short blond hair and eyes that had a strange reddish tint to them. She remained silent as he took his place carefully on the right side of the bed.

Even asleep there was a peculiar strength about the teen. It had nothing to do with the well trained body or sharp features; rather there was something about him. A charismatic strength and protectiveness, fierce. He's a born leader, Lionel thought starting at the closed eyelids that hid sharp emerald green eyes from the world, imagine to have him serving as a Captain. So young but already capable of taking lives to protect those beneath him, just what the army wants. Lionel thought grimly.

Lionel wondered what was going on beneath closed eyelids.

Ace of Spades

Alice Creed was outraged and she wanted to stomp at someone just to rid of the building urge to hurt someone that always accompanied her anger. She was a violent person and it had been a pure miracle that she'd managed to land her job in the medical business but land the job she had and she worked as a nurse and she had taught them all quickly not to trifle with her.

Her workers that were, the patients – or rather their accompanying package of people still always managed to drive her to the point that she wished to draw a bat and knock them all out for a long period of time. She was ready fetch them all matching beds and they could all play unconscious together, in silence.

Alice had never liked loud sounds; they annoyed her and were always accompanied with urge to strangle the shit out of whoever was making them. So why the hell was she working in a hospital filled with the wailing and screams of dying and hurt? Because she felt like it! Her parents had protested the entire way but Alice was nothing if not stubborn.

She smiled grimly, making her way to her next assignment – praying there was no one there to bother her.

Luck, it seemed, were on her side, or the boy's friends/guardians/whatever side because she was ready to draw a knife. It was blessedly silent with only the faint beeping of a machine and an unconscious teen. A quick look at his file named him as Harry James Potter, fifteen years old, eighteen stab wounds, one of them having torn his entire left arm open. Alice peeked closer, inspecting the thick black stitches. Normally they would have used lighter, thinner stitches but the black stitches got the wound together quick and effectively and had probably kept the kid from bleeding out on the table. His upper body, thighs and right hand were all in bandages.

She snorted. "You're in for a world of pain boya." She patted his head, feeling the crusted blood and grimacing. Hearing the telltale sign of someone moving towards the room and she began carefully looking over the machines, taking mental notes of the states and sayings. Her hand twitched, longing to draw the knife from her boot and drive it into the unfortunate visitor. An elderly man walked inside, ex-military of some kind she deduced quickly.

"Are you his guardian?" She demanded, turning fully towards him.

"No, I'm one of the prison guards who brought him here." Alice glanced him from top to toe and up again and snorted. You certainly landed low in the chain old man, she thought, turning back towards the kid who was an infinitely better company than the man whose very presence made her twitch.

Eventually she had to leave to check on a screaming mother with screaming children. From mother and children came a cursing man with too many demands and a whining old witch of a woman. Her shift ended but instead of going home it was with relief she scrambled back to the boy's room to bury herself in his silence. The room was blessedly empty of the old man and Alice curled up with her back against the bed. She worked half price in the hospital for as long as they allowed her to sleep in the rooms of the unconscious patients. For as much as she hated people she couldn't sleep without having someone near and breathing and the boy would serve her purpose for the night.

Ace of Spades

Alice became somewhat of a regular visitor in Harry James Potter's room the following days. All attempts to get a hold of Mr and Mrs Potter had failed and such his room was blessedly empty. Well aware of her habits she had been assigned as his caretaker and she'd been tasked of bathing him and making sure he wasn't bleeding to death or drawing on strange deceases and in turn she got to be his roommate.

A very catchy deal if she had anything to say about it.

Having dragged her bag into the room she had her clothes neatly folded on a previously empty chair inside the room, toothbrush by the sink and other necessary things a little bit of everywhere around his room, their room.

And wasn't that a mightily satisfying thought?

Alice was quite frankly giddy to have Harry James Potter as her roommate; he made excellent company and was oddly soothing in a

way she had experienced with few patients. As long as he remained steadily asleep everything would be alright... perfectly fine.

She hummed as she cleaned his body, door locked behind her, and didn't even notice he was awake until she turned to clean his chest and found a pair of steady emerald green eyes staring at her in bemusement and if not a little bit amusement.

Alice wanted nothing more than to sock him.

Long for me as I for you, forgetting, what will be inevitable, the long black aftermath of pain.

Aftermath

"You killed my son." From the corner of their room Alice peeked up, annoyed by the interruption and even more annoyed at herself for not noticing it. A woman stood before the bed of Harry James Potter, her back towards Alice who could see the eerie eyes of the boy flickering in the light from the small lantern the woman had managed to lay her hands on. The room was otherwise dark and the lantern shone weakly, barely even lightening up the contours of the boy's face.

She would have chosen another room to stay in but she'd been assaulted by one of the bypassing doctors and kicked back inside to stay another night who'd muttered something about not wanting to deal with her. She's sulked until she'd fallen asleep only to be woken by this. She knew she should have kicked that arrogant doctor's ass, knifed him down on the floor to bath in his blood...

A bath sounded wonderful.

"Since you still count him as such, yes, I killed him. It was a matter of his life and John's and John's will always come first to me." The boy's voice was shockingly calm; Alice had half expected him to break out in hysteric denial as was the case normally with humans, especially teens. She cocked her head to the side like a curious dog, hidden in the shadow as she was – listening like some peeping tom.

Such was the life of the nurse Alice Creed...

"That's a lie." The woman's voice was leaning towards hysteria, Alice noted with glee. Hopefully she wouldn't be one of those loud hysterical people. A nice faint would be just perfect, or even better if the boy actually knocked her out. Now wouldn't that be a sight for nurse eyes? Alice stared at him keenly, knowing that now, now there would be denial-

"Yes." Alice blinked in surprise. Did she hear that right? Calm still, nothing in his eyes.

Such a scary boy.

"I lied for you because you cannot handle the truth; you've never been able to. You're nothing but a pitiful coward. Anthony would have killed John three years ago hadn't I interfered and now you nearly lost him again because you were too cowardly to tell John the truth. All you needed to do was sit down and explain that Anthony wasn't all there – that he wasn't coming back. But you didn't want to hear that, less say that and John ventured off in the hope that, perhaps, his big brother had changed." The woman was shaking, Alice noted with absolute glee, as the boy dressed her down in a dry voice. "Are you proud of yourself? Ready to blame me again for the destruction of your family?" His eyes flickered like flames of green.

"You didn't need to kill him." The woman muttered feebly, shaking her head frantically. "You didn't need to-"

"But I wanted to." Harry James Potter's mouth curled into an almost pleasant smile. "He nearly killed John twice and absolutely ruined his life. But perhaps I should thank him for hadn't he gone insane John wouldn't have been mine."

"He's not yours!" Alice had half in mind to stop the woman as she lunged for the boy but the elderly gentleman who had been the boy's only visitor had chosen the perfect moment to enter the room and the man moved with all the ease expected from an ex-military man, catching the woman and tugging her backwards.

"You need to calm down." The woman was performing a perfectly classis exemplary of a breakdown and Alice had front row tickets. She had half in mind to applaud her but preferred to keep out of the mental ward, way too much screaming and banging for her sake. They would drive her insane.

"YOU KILLED MY SON!" The woman was howling and Alice's smile curled into a displeased frown. Women always screamed the loudest and Alice hated their shrill voices that cut through her like razor sharp knives. She rose fluently from her corner, curling a sock in her hand and bunching it together drove it into the woman's mouth as she opened it for another scream. She blinked, wonderfully shocked and going perfectly limp in the ex-military's arms.

"Would you be kind enough to get her out of our room before she manages to build up another fit?" Alice asked perfectly polite as her job demanded. The ex-military glanced towards the boy who stared back with his eyes narrowed and with a short nod hauled the woman out of the room. Alice shut it behind him and went to rummage forth a towel so that she could take a bath.

"You're a nurse here?" The boy was staring at her keenly, amused with his head arrogantly tilted. He seemed unbothered by the fact that she had seen the entire thing; much to Alice's approval but it was overshadowed by the disapproval of hearing him talk nevertheless to her.

"Yes." She wasn't short with him; he had allowed his room for her – unaware as he was. It demanded some measure of response.

"And you're also my roommate, sleeping in the corner?" He was leaning forward and she half wondered how he could properly form the questions, he ought to have been heavily drugged. Perhaps he had demanded not too? She had left the room the moment he awoke to get some else to fetch someone else to deal with him if he broke out in tears or something equally as horrifying...

"Yes." She slung her towel over her shoulder and was half way to the bathroom when his next question caught her off guard:

"Why don't you fetch a mattress or something?" He seemed honestly curious. Alice would have asked if he honestly didn't mind her staying there but lies were common in humans and she wasn't very good at catching them.

"I change room too much." She said, and she shut the bathroom door shut behind her with a firm click, leaving him to think.

Meanwhile Lionel had finally managed to hand over hysterical Jessica Brown to a couple of nurses who happily towed her away with soft cooing voices. Done he returned back to the room where he found Harry staring thoughtfully at the closed windows. "Want me to open them for you?" Lionel asked politely.

Harry's eyes flickered towards him, just as intense and keen as Lionel had expected them to be. "You do not need to apologize."

Harry said after a moment. "You followed your rules; it wasn't a matter of choice. And John is alright so it doesn't matter."

Doesn't it matter that you killed a boy because I couldn't do my job? "I've resigned." Lionel said, taking the empty seat beside the bed.

"Indeed?" He didn't sound surprised and somehow that didn't surprise Lionel. Green eyes regarded him and the boy tilted his lips into a smirk. "What a wonder, want a cookie?" Lionel narrowed his eyes, sharp intelligent eyes taking in the lack of mockery in the boy's voice and the slight slumping of his shoulders.

"That lady..." Harry cocks and eyebrow. "Was that your mother?" Lionel ventures hesitantly.

The boy snorts. "No, she's John's mother – the boy whose older brother I killed? Apparently she wasn't too happy with my course of action."

"You did the right thing." It isn't false words, hadn't Harry killed Anthony Lionel knows he would have done it. Honor above everything; Anthony signed his death sentence the moment he struck his knife.

"I did." Harry agreed. "And I would do it all over again if it meant John's safety." And Lionel heard the words that weren't uttered: I would tear down the world for him. Unwavering and unquestionable loyalty, such a thing was hard to come by and fearsome to deal with. Lionel would have done anything to have it directed towards him and he envied the young boy five doors down.

"A honorable trait." Lionel inclined his head.

The boy said nothing on the subject. "Why are you here?" He asked instead, leaning back against his pillows. "If it's guilt-"

"It's honor." Lionel interrupted, offended but trying not to show it.

Harry smiled wickedly. "Yes, honor." His eyes seemed to darken. "The same honor that made you quit your job and would have forfeited the life of Anthony Brown had I failed."

Lionel had been alive for fifty-two years but never before had he felt so like an open book standing before another. "Indeed." He said, face blank from emotions. The amusement in Harry's eyes increased and he huffed a laugh, crossing his arms but keeping his left arm in an upward position to keep the blood from flooding downwards.

"I'm making you uncomfortable." The boy stated calmly. "You don't like that."

"I don't." Lionel narrowed his eyes.

"Yet you remain. A lesser human would have turned away and walked through the door. There's nothing keeping you here so why aren't you moving?" Harry leaned forward, towards him. "You want something from me."

"What makes you say that?" Lionel felt the hair on his back raise as the boy chuckled.

"Because all want something from someone that is the way of life. Your very presence in this room proves that."

"And if I said I was here to offer you my service?" Lionel challenged, liking the boy less now that he was awake and talking.

"It is so satisfy your honor." He grinned, not looking perturbed at all even Lionel frowned at him. Clearly an apology would've have been in order for Lionel very much doubted the boy had forgiven him on any level.

"He's got you trounced old man." Alice said as she slipped into the room, scrubbing her dark blond hair.

"My name is Lionel Watson." He said stiffly, immediately on defense.

"And?" Alice gave him a bored look. "Should that concern me somehow? I'm just a lowly nurse."

"She doesn't like you talking to her." Harry informed him smartly. "She hates loud sounds and humans – especially loud human screams, they annoy her. That's why she stuffed a sock down Jessica's throat."

Alice twitched, longing to nail his head against the wall. "Shut up." She sulked. "And you, old man, if you don't want anything more get out."

Harry waved his hand, a white card between his index and middle finger. "Free of charge old man, you're not. I'll call on you if I need anything. I'll make sure it'll be something to satisfy that glorious honor of yours."

Lionel left, the door clicking shut behind his tense back.

Alice glanced over at Harry who cocked an eyebrow and they shared a look of mutual understanding.

It was easy enough to make up rules they would both be comfortable with. All Alice wanted was silence and Harry was very good with silence.

All efforts of contacting his parents had been useless and Harry found that he couldn't even remember the address. A sign that the Potter Mansion had been put under the Fidelius Charm which meant that there would be some trouble with finding home later on. There was some suspicion from the Hospital personal concerning his home life and Harry had been assaulted several times until Alice had had enough and cheerily informed her colleagues that she would... deal with it. Deal with it meaning she wouldn't do a thing; she just wanted the calm and silence.

Harry's bike had thankfully been restored (thanks to an anonymous person Harry suspected to be Lionel Watson) and was waiting for him in the parking lot for when he was healthy enough to drive it home which wouldn't be for a week or so more. There had been some trouble with his arm during the second week which had nearly sent him into a cardiac arrest due. He hadn't quite gripped what had caused it but the doctor's had been fairly paranoid and vetoed to keep him two weeks more. A week and passed since which meant that he had spent roughly three weeks in the hospital without contact from home.

Harry wondered what his parents were doing to find him but didn't spare it much thought.

His gun had also been returned under mysterious circumstances and only Alice knew that he kept it beneath his pillow as he slept and she had said nothing more on the subject than a warning to not point it towards her. Life in Hospital wasn't turning out to be so bad. If only the poking and prodding would be kept to a minimal Harry would have been quite content.

But then there was the entire matter of John. He still hadn't been able to see his self-adopted little brother since Jessica refused to have Harry anywhere near her only remaining son and there was little he could say on the subject. She was John's mother and Harry was just an adoptee dog to the family who had turned to bite the master.

Harry closed his eyes and thought of Death.

Ace of Spades

Daniel couldn't believe it. He just couldn't. This went beyond anything his parents had ever done to Harry and they hadn't even had the decency to mention anything to him. He had to hear it from Remus who had grown extremely worried after nearly five weeks without any contact with Harry. The prospect of Harry would be with the Brown family had been blown to nothing as Remus had visited them and found nothing of use.

And the fact that the Fidelius charm had been put in place...? Daniel wanted to groan and curse his parents. Harry was out there. He could have been kidnapped by Death Eaters or – or whatever the hell he was messing with in the muggle world for Harry was always messing with something.

Hermione had written home to her parents to ask if they had heard anything in the news paper and Daniel wanted to write down to his parents and demand an explanation but The Toad was watching their every move and neither Ron, Hermione or Daniel doubted that she would sink to the lowly level of intercepting his letters.

Daniel slumped against his favorite tree near the lake, hidden from castle view and for the first time in his life Daniel didn't wish that Harry had magic, rather he wished that he had had none.

Daniel wanted nothing to do with the coming war, he was damn sick of it already.

"Just what is happening to our family Sunny...?" Daniel leaned his head against his knees and sighed miserably.

Ace of Spades

Sirius slammed James up against the wall, furious beyond reason. "Where is he!" He snarled.

James eyes widened in shock at the sudden assault and he threw his hands up. "Whoa! Calm down Padfoot – what are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about your son." Sirius hissed.

"Daniel is gone?" James asked in confusion. "But Dumbledore haven't-"

"Your other son Prongs." Sirius said in a voice that belied the calm lurking beneath the surface in his eyes. "Jessica said he was in the Hospital until a week ago but hasn't heard from him since. He's gone – lost without a fucking trace and you haven't even had the decency to send someone out to look for him!"

James narrowed his eyes. "I thought he was with the Browns."

"But he isn't!" Sirius slammed his fist against the wall beside James head. "Harry is gone and I want to know why he hasn't come home!"

"The Fidelius charm." James hissed, eyes widening. "Dumbledore is the secret keeper and Harry mustn't have been here to hear it! And since Lily was sent on mission and I just returned home-"

"Harry hasn't been able to hear it." Sirius released James abruptly and the head Auror just about prevented himself from flapping ungracefully to the floor.

"Dear Merlin I closed my son out of his own home." James groaned in despair. "He could be anywhere." He looked up, mouth opening, only to find that Sirius were already gone in a flash of green flames.

Ace of Spades

"Severus..." Lord Voldemort stared down at his kneeling potion master, a fiendish smile creeping across his lips. "I have a task for you."

Ace of Spades

"Rita." Sirius greeted cordially as he stepped out of her fire place in a smooth dust free move. He was neatly clad in muggle business suit which surprised the journalist who raised a smooth eyebrow.

"You come uninvited." She greeted neatly, swirling around in the chair she'd been occupying. "I assume you come in business."

Sirius smiled grimly. "I need you to find my godson."

Ace of Spades

Ron wondered why everything around him seemed to balance on a line between 'fine' and 'going straight to hell'. Percy's sudden attitude during the summer had sucked the happiness straight out of mom and dad and everyone seemed so angry and despairing. Daniel's family was falling into pieces and there was nothing he could do as long as he was stuck in school and Hermione had taken to vanish off for hours. Nothing odd, except she was in the library and Ron didn't want to follow her like some stalker.

She seemed happy... like she was planning something, the glint in her eyes were present and accounted for and for once Ron didn't feel like being the one to smother it. So curled up in the owlery he petted Pig, a present from Sirius some years earlier, and for once the tiny owl had settled and was cooing softly while nibbling on his thumb.

Ron felt... tired. Being stuck in the middle of everything sucked and his short temper hadn't exactly made everything fine and dandy for him. The words 'I shall watch my temper' had been mockingly ingrained on the back of his right hand for weeks now and none were the wiser. Frankly he didn't want anyone to know... they had their own worries.

Ron stuck out his tongue, wondering when the hell he had started to adapt this... this consideration. It wasn't like him. At all. But then again, everyone seemed to be changing so he really shouldn't be surprised he was hoping on the trend. He was going to shock Bill and Charlie to death whenever he saw them.

Ron sighed.

"Ron..." He looked up, startled from his thoughts as Angelina stepped into the owlery. She was biting her lip, cradling a pure white owl and looking decidedly surprised to find him there. "What are you doing here?"

Ron started at her, noticing her tired state and hating it. "Thinking." He answered, letting his head collide against the wall with a thud. He didn't like what the whole mess in his third year had turned Angelina into, even if it was only recently he had started to take real notice of it. He had caught both Fred and George discussing her silently between themselves and had been drawn by their uncharacteristic worry.

Rape destroyed people. It was a filthy and inhumane thing to do as far as Ron was concerned.

"Oh." She shuffled towards one of the windows, visibly hesitating but after a moment tying her letter to the owl in her arms and letting it go. To Ron's surprise she was smiling softly.

Ace of Spades

Harry hefted his bag more securely on his shoulder, peering around the parking lot as he straddled his bike. "Let's see here now." He murmured, voice muffled by the helmet and visor. "I have no idea where I live and Jessica won't let me anywhere near the house so it's best to let her cool down before I swing around to visit John..." Harry's voice hitched as he wondered if John would forgive him.

He closed his eyes and would have rubbed his temples if he could. Nothing seemed to be going the way he wanted it as of late. But John was safe... wasn't that what counted? Always safe... always safe... that was what he had dedicated his life for.

So why hadn't John tried to come and visit him? He had sneaked away in the middle of the night to visit Anthony who had nearly killed Harry and would have killed John hadn't Harry interfered. But he hadn't come to visit Harry in the Hospital for the entire duration of time...?

Harry clutched his chest, breathing in deeply through his nose. It hurt, knowing that John hadn't come. It hurt unlike anything he had ever experienced and he hated it. Hated it something fiercely, hated himself for being weak.

"I'm a big boy now." Harry murmured, long forgotten words of an eight year old. He closed his eyes with a sigh, wondering just where the hell he was supposed to go.

"My poor child... how you suffer..." Harry's eyes shot open in surprise as he felt the presence of Death's ghost around him, enveloping him in a soothing haze. "Come to me my dear child..."

Harry's eyes clouded over, darkening and he spun his bike in reverse. "Death..."

It felt like a cloud had settled over him as he moved through the forest, stumbling into the sphere shaped meadow and moving softly through the field of bluish purple flowers, shrugging out of his clothes as he did. He came to a halt before the dark water to fall on his knees, staring down at it with dark green eyes. Sea blue eyes peered up at him from just beneath the surface, calmly waiting. His body tipped forward and pale arm rose to meet him.

The Ace of Spades is traditionally seen as the highest card in the deck of playing cards.

The Ace of Spades

"Well if it isn't my dear John!" Jonah said brightly, teeth gleaming brightly as he welcomed the young boy with a firm enclosing hug. "It's been some time since I last saw you. Where do you have 'Ari?"

"He's not here?" John looked pale and withdrawn and kept rubbing his left arm while glancing around nervously. Jonah frowned worriedly, putting a gentle hand on the boy's back and leading him to the backroom and pressing gently on his shoulder to make him sit down in one of the couches surrounding the sitting table.

Pouring up some tea, only just catching himself from pouring a glass of apple juice as well, Jonah handed it to the boy who cradled it in his hands, looking lost. "Why would you think he'd be here?" Jonah asked, sliding down beside John who didn't even react when Jonah put a hand on his shoulder to discreetly direct John's attention towards him.

"I don't know." He sounded miserable and looked even more so.

Jonah's eyebrows creased in worry. "Did you have a fight?" He fingered the strands of blonde hair in John's neck as the boy thought, trying to sooth him like he'd sometimes seen Harry do. A discrete touch that said so very much since Harry very rarely touched people out of anything but necessity.

"I... I don't know." John glanced up, blue eyes imploring. "Jonah, I think... I think I've made a terrible mistake..."

Ace of Spades

"He's going to be alright – Lily, you need to calm down." Lily rounded furiously on her husband, green eyes glassy with tears.

"How can you say that!" She demanded, closed hands trembling furiously. "Our son it out there somewhere on his own because we didn't even have the decency to make sure he was in on the secret! And to find out that he'd been... been hospitalized," she spat the

word with a furious sob, "he could have been dead James! My baby could have been dead!"

"Lily-" James reached for her but she jerked away, shaking her head furiously with long blood red strands whirling around her.

"I've been a terrible mother; I know that James, I know that! I can't accept him as he is and it tears me up inside! But I love him! I love my son and now... now... Oh God." She buried her face in her hands, trembling. "He must hate us so."

"Harry doesn't hate you." Both Lily and James swirled around to find Sirius leaning against the door opening. Famous journalist Rita Skeeter beside him, eyes hungry but no pen in sight.

"How can you know that?" Lily demanded. "How can you-"

"Because he told me he understood." Sirius sighed deeply and Rita laid a soothing hand on his shoulder. "Harry isn't stupid, far from it, and he has a gift for reading people. Harry... understands people on a level that is almost frighteningly." Sirius dragged a hand through his messy hair, shaking his head. "Just... Harry doesn't hate... not really. Not unless you cross the line and hurt someone he loves." Sirius shrugged hopelessly.

Lily's eyes flashed in sudden understanding. "John... Just what is he to Harry?"

Sirius stared hard at her, his mouth settling into a grim line. "I don't know." He said hopelessly. "Too much? Most definitely. Harry would do anything for that kid and I mean anything." He threw the week old news paper on the table.

BOY STRANGLES PRISONER TO DEATH

Guard: "I've never seen anything like it."

Lily and James paled and Sirius face was ashen as he dragged a tired hand through his hair. "It's dated roughly five weeks back. You both know Anthony?" Terse nods. It was hard to forget the boy who had nearly killed their oldest son. Harry pale and near death, monitors beeping in the white hospital room... "As I understand it John was tricked to visit Anthony who had decided to finish his

'mission', convinced it was going to make 'everything alright again'." Sirius said sarcastically with air quotes. "The guard stationed outside was in on it, some sadistic bastard who wanted to hear some screams. Anthony tortured John and would probably have killed him hadn't Harry interfered again... and this time Harry didn't let him out alive."

"Oh Merlin." James cradled his face in his hands. "And now he's roaming around on his own...?" The idea was horrifying and James swallowed thickly, his throat suddenly cotton dry. "It was bad enough with Daniel and Quirrell... I didn't even consider that Harry might be forced to deal with the same. Not in the muggle world."

It was supposed to be a safe place, a way to keep Harry safely out of the war. Harry was good at blending in, able to melt between the two worlds but he'd always been more comfortable in the muggle world and neither James nor Lily had doubted that he'd one day chose to become a part of that world. The safer world where the people didn't carry around weapons ready to drive someone to the point of insanity with the proper intention or steal a life with two words.

It had been a matter of relief. They didn't want to hold Harry back from his happiness and forcing him to stay in the magical world would only result in his unhappiness so they had allowed him to roam as he liked. Harry had a choice that Daniel wasn't allowed to, a chance to chose to stay out of the war.

Daniel was destined to kill Voldemort or die trying. There was no escaping the very real possibility of Daniel dying before even reaching the age of twenty. It was only natural that they had doted a bit more on him, fearful as they were. They had never neglected Harry, they had made sure he was happy and that he had everything he needed. But Harry's world couldn't be invited into theirs and there had always been a distance between them. Harry belonged in the muggle world, they belonged in the magical world.

There was no merging it together.

Lily's parents and grandparents were dead and all she had was a muggle sister who hated her. She had chosen the magical world without regret. James had always been a part of it. Daniel had been born into it with a heavy destiny on his shoulder.

Harry just wasn't a part of that... and it was hard to be close when you existed in different worlds.

But he was their son but something had gone terribly wrong. The shock and disappointment... the shame of having a squib. The fear of being at fault, to blame – Lily had been forced to hear the whispers from the moment the news got out. The brother of the boy-who-lived... a squib... All those judging eyes on her, blaming her.

Lily hadn't been able to handle it.

And James who had grown-up with pureblood ideals where having a squib child was the outmost shame...

"How can he be expected to deal with this on his own?" James demanded desperately. "Daniel just broke..." It was a dark period of their lives... Daniel hadn't been able to handle the death of Quirrell. For days afterwards he'd been afraid to use magic, afraid of what he could do with it and he had withdrawn almost completely into himself. It had been very stressful. And the basilisk in his second year and the mess with the whole tournament... Daniel had so much to shoulder and all they could do was be there for him to keep him from crumbling beneath it.

And now, when Harry needed them the most there wasn't even the possibility of seeing him and holding him. Harry was gone, absent without even his ever faithful John by his side.

"Harry is four years older than Daniel were when he killed. We can only hope for the best." Sirius said darkly.

"What Mr Tall Dark and Mysterious is trying to say is that Harry is a smart kid and he'll probably figure something out and if you're lucky you'll have him home before the end of the year." Rita said smartly. "There is absolutely nothing you can do but keep an eye out."

"Thank you Rita." Sirius shot the journalist a look which earned him an innocent shrug in return. "I hate to admit it but she's right. The war is in full spin, sending order members out to look for him would only draw unnecessary attention. It's better if we let the world believe you've locked Harry up our something."

"Yes... Yes, of course you're right Padfoot." James ruffled his hair, tightening his other hand around Lily's.

Sirius grinned weakly. "When am I not?"

His words sounded hollow even to him.

Ace of Spades

"There should always be a matter of smooth interest." The skeleton told him firmly, age old bones clicking against the floor as it paced before the blackboard. "Or else the information won't be absorbed into your puny little brain."

"You call my brain puny when you have none?" Harry laughed. "Perhaps you're jealous Arravia?"

The skeleton huffed. "Jealous of that?" He gave Harry's head a critical stare. "I would think not. I learn so much more now that I am dead than I ever did alive."

The old skeleton was of a professor from the late 16th century who had been hanged for his ideals. Harry had met him when visiting Death for the second time, apparently Arravia, as he had demanded to be called – his real name was Temperance Foaley but he wanted nothing to do with the name – liked to argue... in particular with Death since he was firmly convinced Death was some kind of fallen god as opposed to fallen angel as thus the vessel of all there was to know.

Harry suspected Death just kept him around because he'd grown tired to kicking him out. Arravia could be very insistent and Death was very indulgent when it concerned his subjects. Arravia was a lingering soul of sort, a rarity. Death had once told him that it was pure stubbornness that kept the skeleton moving and Harry didn't doubt him for a second.

Stubbornness was Arravia's middle name and the skeleton was mightily proud of it.

"Now, Death has appointed me as your teacher." Harry could almost see the skeleton shiver in delight at the honor. "And I've promised him to teach you all there is to know about the spinning top."

Both Arravia and Harry looked at the deceptively innocent looking spinning top on the desk Harry was occupying. The chair he was sitting on was old and felt ready to splinter beneath him and it was a wonder the black board hadn't crumbled to dust. Harry suspected Arravia's own magic was what kept it together for the old skeleton had wanted nothing more than to be a teacher in life and had claimed the things for his own when Death has shown them to him. Currently Harry was in Arravia's room and it was saturated heavily with Death's scented magic swirling together with Arravia's.

"Yes, I've gathered as much." Harry said, leaning his left arm loosely rested on his left leg and right elbow on his right knee to cradle his chin.

"I would have been astounded if you had not." Arravia said dryly. "For even a child of four should have understood as much."

"It's reassuring to have my mentality compared to a four year old." Harry deadpanned. "Makes me all fuzzy and warm inside."

Arravia turned towards him and Harry got the feeling that if skeleton could squint that's exactly what Arravia was doing, glasses tilting precariously on his nose as there was no ears for them to hold on to. "You are not getting sick I hope." Arravia said suspiciously. "It could be a sign of fever-"

Stubbornness might have been Arravia's middle name but mother-hen was his first. And he tended to take everything by the word.

"I'm fine oldie." Harry grinned. "No fevers, no ache, no nothing." He assured the skeleton. Arravia huffed but accepted what he said, turning to draw on the board. The spinning top appeared in white chalk, followed by the familiar sphere.

As he watched Harry's thoughts wandered back to the lady of the water, a soft smile appearing on his lips. Her warmth lingered in his naked body and while Harry didn't doubt Death could have done the same it was she who had left her presence lingering like a curling flame in his chest. It could have been snowing and Harry doubted he would have felt it.

"The spinning top," Arravia said sharply, "it not to be underestimated."

"Yes, first lesson learned." Harry nodded.

"But not taken to heart." Arravia folded bony hands across his ribcage. "You will use it if the situation demands so, even against Death's warnings." He said this with zero reproach, merely stating fact. "Your hero complex will one day get you killed." Arravia said this as if it was ultimate fact and Harry's lips twitched.

"I suppose it will." Amusement colored his tone.

"I would not be surprised if it took your sanity first." Arravia continued, as if he hadn't spoken.

"I didn't know I could still be considered sane." Harry quirked a grin.

Arravia huffed. "You are still very much sane Child of Death." And there he goes with the title again... Harry rolled his eyes. "Just because your arm cut his air supply-"

"Without feeling a drop of regret afterwards." Harry's face flat lined. "I believe that is the characteristic of a psychopath."

Arravia bared his already bare teeth and slammed his hand down on the table. "You forget who you are!" Arravia said sharply, nailing Harry in place with empty dark sockets. "You are Death's child-there would have been something very wrong with you indeed if you found that you regretted helping Death taking the life of someone so foul!" He hissed.

Harry cocked his head. "Helping Death?" He repeated blankly.

Arravia's face flat lined. "He has not explained anything to you, has he? About what and who he is and how he works." Arriva spun the chalk board around twice and when it came to place again the chalk had been erased and in place was a neatly drawn figure Harry recognized as Death.

"Listen to me Child of Death and listen closely." Arravia leaned in close and Harry stared into the hollow holes of his skull. "Death is Death, and you understand that on a subconscious level, otherwise

you would have been a writhing mass of guilt. I ask you this; why did Death interfere with your life?" Arriva asked him, sockets imploring.

It had been a long time ago... Seven years in fact, since Harry spoke with Death for the first time.

"He said... He said he saw what I was destined for." Harry said after a moment. "That he could see my destiny and that he recognized himself in what he saw. He said-"

"I feel every presence of those that are born, my child, and I see their destinies in their souls. Your fate was both cruel and unfair. I saw myself reflected in your eyes. I am not allowed to change the paths of human life but I couldn't leave you to face it on your own so I stayed by your bedside to the night of Halloween. I saw your life as a sacrificial lamb." Death's voice was heavy as he recalled the words aloud for them. "Your soul torn even for one so young, drained of emotion and shaped to be a sacrifice for light's victory. You were never meant to live."

And after a moment, those words that signified what Death had done for him. "I broke my own laws, I interfered." Death's voice drifted away, leaving them in a moment of silence as Harry sorted through the words.

The conclusion very nearly made him tip backwards. "Anthony was destined to be killed by me?" Harry said blankly, the words sounding odd put aloud.

"Yes. And Death was there, watching, waiting and ready to take him away." Arravia sat down, glasses clinking. "You are Death's Child. Death should not be something to fear or be repulsed off or be ashamed for." Arravia said logically. "Death, after all, is imprinted on your very soul."

Arravia said something more but Harry had stopped listening. I broke my own laws, I interfered.

Harry knew that all interference had consequences, Harry wondered what Death's had been. I would do it again, child of mine, a thousand times over if only to see the smile on your face. The consequences were mine to take and you should not let speculations lay heavy on your mind.

You will not tell me?

No, I will not. Not today and not tomorrow but who knows what waits in the future?

You do. Harry thought, mouth twitching.

Only to a certain extent and things can always change... You're a living example.

Will you tell me about yourself?

Ah, yes. I've been wanting to tell you for a very long time now my child... Now I believe Arravia should appreciate you tuning back into the world. There was a ghost of a chuckle before Death's presence faded from his mind and Harry snapped back to reality to find Arriva staring hard at him.

"I see you're back." He said dryly.

"Indeed." Harry matched his tone.

"And Death says to focus on the spinning top." Harry imagined Arravia's tone was colored by something akin to jealousy. "He is going to tell you his story."

"That he will." Harry inclined his head.

"You make me want to strangle you Child of Death." Arravia decided. "But Death is Death and I shall abide by his word. And so, the spinning top." Arravia hummed, black board miraculously back to spinning top and sphere. "What is the spinning top?"

"A source of information." Harry answered promptly. "It contains all the information about the world but is constantly being updated since the world is forever changing." It was something that had been on his mind. A lot.

"Yes." Arravia inclined his head, turning his spine towards Harry. "What you don't know is that Death is not the creator." Harry leaned forward, surprised. "The spinning top was created a long, long time

ago by a woman who sought to rule the world. I believe you know her by the title Morgana Le Fey."

"Are you serious?" Harry asked breathless. "Morgana Le Fey created the spinning top?"

"Yes, but she could not control it." Arravia shook his skull. "She was addicted by its power from first touch and it only grew worse with each use. It's why Death cautioned you about its and the reason he chose to keep it in his possession when you were still young. I still think you are too young but Death should know what he is talking about..." For the first time Harry saw Arravia openly doubting Death.

"The spinning top turned Morgana Le Fey against Merlin and she killed him but the power of the spinning top has an awareness of its own and turned against Morgana when she tried to get rid of it, frightened of its real power once she tasted it but unable to do so." Arravia sighed heavily. "It killed her and Death took it into his possession. He cowed its power and bound it so that only someone marked by Death should be able to use it." Arravia said gravely. "You see, it was not only Death's attention your birth caught... but Morgana Le Fey's spinning top as well. It took Death two years after his interference before he took note of it and five years after that he met you for the first time in person. The spinning top was already bound to you and Death had marked your soul, signing his approval."

"But what about the tattoo?" Harry's left fingers touched the black ink burned into his the right side of his shoulder blades. "When I touched it after John got it up for me I felt a flaring pain and knew it had marked me. Wasn't that unnecessary if Death had already marked my soul?"

"The tattoo is a direct link between you, Death and the spinning top." Arravia held out his hand and black smoke rose up to form a mirage of his tattoo. The black Ace of Spades with a leering skull inside it and six words written beneath it in a shadowy style: I want to know the world. Harry jerked back when he realized the skull's mouth was open and inside the skull's mouth was the unmistakable shape of the spinning top.

"That wasn't there before." The black smoke swirled between his fingers as he reached out to touch the apparition. "The words and

the spinning top..." Harry's hand fell lax at his side, feeling oddly discomfited by the skull's eerie grin.

"Before Death was your anchor." Arravia folded his hands behind his back. "The direct link wasn't needed, he suppressed it. But the moment you used it on your own the power burned anew through your body and for the first there was nothing to hinder it. The spinning top exist to fulfill its master's wish and it burned the wish into your skin as its accursed power burned to life. The skull cracked its mouth open to reveal the spinning top since no longer Death kept it locked up and it folded in your hand to obey you."

Harry lowered his eyes to the floor, thoughtful. "What did it turn into for Morgana le Fey?" He asked after a moment. "I assume she did not wish for the same thing as I did."

"I want to control the world." Arravia smiled as Harry grimaced. "Yes, a single world separates your wishes."

"You said she could not control it." Harry cocked his head. "Why?"

"Why indeed..." Arravia mumbled. "Power needs a level headed host. You know the saying; power corrupts and ultimate power corrupts ultimately? There is much truth in it. You can already feel its addiction." Arravia gave him a knowing look and Harry guiltily drew his attention away from the spinning top. "I would presume her mind could not handle it."

"But why did he give it to me?" Harry looked up imploringly. "Just because the spinning top chose me didn't mean he had to give it to me. He said he could fulfill any wish I wanted, surely Death had other means?"

"Of course." Arravia huffed. "But I do not claim to know how Death works. If you want to know why he gave you the spinning top you have to ask him yourself."

Death?

It is your life child. Death's mind caressed his own softly. The freedom of choice is the right of all sentient beings. The spinning top rightfully is yours as it has chosen you. Who am I to take that from you?

Harry picked up the spinning top, clenching his fist around it. His eyes flickered like flames in the darkness. Thank you.

Anything for you child...

"There is something I don't understand." Harry forcefully returned his attention to Arravia whose skull clinked to the side. "If the skull is Death, and the spinning top is Morgana Le Fey – what am I?"

Arravia's smile twisted oddly. "It's it obvious? You are the Ace of Spades. You are Death's card."

I have never seen a greater monster or miracle in the world than myself.

Monster

"I can't believe it! He's gone- fucking gone! And everyone is just expecting me to roll over on my back like a good dog and pretend that everything is fucking fine!" Daniel exploded, rounding furiously on his two friends. Hermione flipped her wand, setting up silence wards around the room. Daniel paced furiously behind the teacher table, topaz eyes burning. "Everything is going wrong- why is everything going wrong?" Daniel demanded, eyes imploring as he rounded on his two best friends.

"You should put some faith in him Daniel. I'm sure Sunny is fine." Hermione said soothingly. "He can take care of himself and he'll probably be home before summer."

"Yeah," Ron chimed in. "I mean if he can survive in the forest on his own the muggle world shouldn't be a problem." He joked lamely. Daniel choked up laugh that sounded suspiciously like a sob.

"I wish I could talk to my parents – I want to know what they're doing to solve this." Daniel mumbled miserably. "God it feels like yesterday I was waving him off and now he's lost..."

"Daniel..." Hermione touched his shoulder softly but he shrugged it off, turning towards her with a false optimistic smile as he wiped away traitorous tears.

"I know. I know... There is nothing we can do." He took a deep breath. "So, about the club – you said you had something important to share Hermione?"

"Ah, yes." She fiddled with her sleeve, flickered her eyes to the floor and up again and sighed. "Last week I was approached by Lawliet Rosier." Her eyes burned, dark and troubled and very serious and it was only this that halted the initial response from leaving Ron's tongue with a snap. He reined himself in and took a deep breath, nodding for her to continue.

Hermione and Daniel exchanged brief surprised glance. "What did he want?" Daniel asked suspiciously. "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

Hermione shook her head, hesitated. "He wants the Slytherins to have a chance and join the dueling club. As he said it, they're just as human as we are and deserve a chance to defend themselves." Hermione shook her head. "He had... reasons... that he asked me not to share with you, not yet, but I assure you they are very real and very serious and I seriously think we should consider it before turning it down."

Daniel frowned and exchanged a dark look with Ron. The two of them would talk later. "Let us think about it." Ron said after a moment. "We have DA now and we shouldn't keep them waiting."

Hermione let out a breath of relief. "Thank you." She said sincerely.

Most of the DA members were already there when they arrived. Hermione had figured out a way to charm fake necklaces to heat up with the date for the next meeting during the summer when she had been bickering with Harry who had jokingly suggested tattooing each members, like the Dark Lord. It was the same charm only used differently. Each member bore a necklace, not the same – that had been too inconspicuous – rather they had all chosen something which Hermione had then transfigured rocks and leaves into. Even Harry had been included; the "Master" on his dog collar had been sent and charmed by Hermione.

At first Hermione had worn a book, Ron a broom and Daniel a golden snitch. But after a letter of advice from Harry and much discussion between them they had been trying to figure out how to become Animagi. They hadn't had much luck other than figuring out what they were thanks to Hermione's potion skills and they had changed their necklace thereafter.

Daniel's animagus form had turned out to be a Gorilla, which had sent Ron into a fit of laughter when he first heard about it. Gorillas move around by knuckle-walking, although they sometimes walk bipedally for short distances while carrying food or in defensive situations. Its coat was entirely black with Daniel's topaz eyes gleaming instead of the common yellow. His animagus form seemed to reach the impressive height of 175 centimeters and weighted nearly 200 kg (which had quickly shut Ron up) and could reach a speed of 40km/h.

Ron was a red fox, a *Vulpus vulpus* with elongated body and relatively short limbs dipped in black. The color of the fur matched Ron's hair perfectly with long bushy tail dipped in white as well as the underside of the body. Agile and nimble, able to jump over two meters and swim quite well as well. His animagus form seemed to be about 50 cm in shoulder height and weighted about 10 kg and was able to reach the speed of 50km/h.

Hermione had turned out to be a lioness, the tallest specie among felines and also the second-heaviest. Her coat was dark with the underside lighter in color and, the tip of her tail dipped in black and eyes the same dark rich color as her human form. Her animagus form seemed to be a 126 kg heavy and 124 cm tall at the shoulders and able to reach a speed of 56km/h.

Whenever there had been a scratch of free time they had used it for animagus research but it was hard and it was no surprise, really, that it had taken the Marauders a good two years to transform fully. And with the DA to handle, lessons, the Toad, Harry's sudden disappearance and a mess of other things it would probably take them longer than that. It was only Hermione's brilliant mind that had gotten them so far. Nevertheless it was always in the back of their minds.

"Everyone!" Hermione called loudly once they had reached the platform at the front of the room. The Hufflepuffs, Gryffindors and Ravenclaws gathered before them quieted immediately and Hermione left the stage for Daniel.

"Right." Daniel rubbed the back of his neck. "I thought that we might get it on with the Patronus charm today and hopefully most of you will have it mastered by Christmas. At least, that is the plan." He gave a lopsided grin. "The Patronus charm is used to scare of Dementors, creatures that feed of your happiest emotions. You have all heard about the massive Dementor break out from Azkaban. It is so secret that they had gone to join Voldemort's side in the war, no matter what the papers try to deny." He said grimly.

"Can you show us?" Dennis Creevy asked meekly. "The charm I mean."

Daniel drew his wand, his mind wandering to six year old Harry's smile as he munched on an apple.

"Want one Tripper?"

"Don't call me that!"

"But it suits you so well."

"... Shut up Sunny."

"Expecto Patronum!" A large wolf burst thought, teeth bared in a snarl as it crouched protectively in front of Daniel. Daniel noted with surprise the collar around the wolf's neck and felt his cheeks warm when he caught sight of a plate engraved with a sun. He let it fade from view before anyone else could take real note of it.

There were appreciated mutters around the room and Daniel shifted awkwardly as he caught the admiring stares. Despite growing up with them he was still incredible uncomfortable to stand in the limelight with eyes that looked up at him as he was something special.

"To do the charm you need to focus a memory that makes you happy. It will be much harder to do so in the vicinity of a Dementor but Hermione has figured out a way to test ourselves later."

Hermione stepped forward and all eyes went to her. "Basically it's a spell that mimics the effect of an Dementor, on a lesser scale. Once you can produce a Patronus without much problem you should turn to me and I will teach you the spell in pairs so that you can try it on each other."

"You should try the spell on Death Eaters if you ever find yourself running from one," Ron advised from his perch, "It should throw them off. Hermione tried it on me." He offered in way of explanation. "Made me want to curl up in a corner."

There was a round of uneasy laughs.

Hermione shot Ron a dry look which he returned with a roll of his neck and a cheeky smile. "Well, as Ron so neatly informed us the spell has its other uses. Everything you learn in here will be for a reason." She said firmly.

She stepped back, leaving the word to Daniel.

Hermione and Ron had already been practicing the Patronus curse and were well on their way to get corporal ones. Hermione's was some kind of small slim animal while Ron had some form of piggish figure. They joined it with the rest as they practiced. Luna was well on her way as well and Ginny and surprisingly Neville was getting there fast. Fred and George were far more interested in the other spell as they had already mastered the Patronus form, able to produce twin hyenas. Hermione patiently explained the basics and it didn't take long before Fred was on the floor, eyes wide and glazy as he tried to cast the Patronus spell.

Ron, Daniel and Hermione exchanged grins when the lesson was finally over and their students were sent off in pairs with Hermione keeping an eye on the Marauders map to make sure they all got back safely to their common rooms.

Ron collapses with an exhausted sigh, pillows appearing magically beneath him. "They're getting better." He said with a lazy grin. "Still don't like that Smith kid but there's nothing I can do about that." Not yet at least... "Anyway, I think I have an idea of my patronus form." He grinned, loving the surprised looks on his two best friend's faces.

"What is it?" Daniel asked curiously.

"A boar." Ron said proudly, already anticipating the reaction. He was no disappointed.

Daniel broke into laughter. "It fits you," Daniel managed to choke out, shaking his head with a wide grin. "It's great, actually. Congrats Ron," they hi-fived.

"What about you Hermione?" Daniel turned curiously. "Any luck during the lesson?"

She shook her head. "I'm sure it's something from the Mustelids family but it's too indistinct for me to figure out just what. It could be everything from a weasel, otter or some kind of polecat."

"Weasel..." Ron choked. "Imagine you could be a Weasley." He snickered and Hermione shot him a wry look.

"Great one there Ron," Daniel laughed.

Ace of Spades

Beatrice Wesley did not want to admit to herself that she was actually worried about Harry Potter's sudden disappearance. That cruel boy surely deserved anything life could throw at him, and she had smiled when she heard about his Hospital visit (admittedly horrified when she read about it in the news paper and actually, and dared she think it, thankful for what he had done).

She was torn up and had joined her worried colleagues when the Potter family was not to be reached and Brown's mother had been very unhelpful in the matter, shutting the door in their face whenever they tried to ask for clues. John was miserable and only shook his head when they asked and didn't seem to have any idea of where Harry had gone which only increased the worry since Harry didn't go anywhere without informing John, not for such a long time anyway.

Two months.

It was unbelievable. The class was torn up, Elena Hyde seemed to have gone into depression and Philip Bates was uncharacteristically grim, not even reading those darn spider books of his (which she was very thankful for, she had hated him from the moment he dared to shove a spider up in a face to show her). She hated it. Hated what he had done and was doing to her class.

So, getting him back was the only logical conclusion to fix this mess. This is what she told herself as she dialed a well used number. Harry James Potter needed to be found to make things right it had nothing, nothing to do with the unpleasant churning in her gut or the strange feeling in her heart.

None what so ever.

There was a click as the man on the other side picked up the phone. "Yes, this is Lionel Watson speaking."

"Hey dad." Beatrice said grimly. "I need a favor."

"Beatrice." He sounded surprised but happy but it quickly turned to worry which she read perfectly from his voice. "You haven't gotten into some kind of trouble I hope."

She huffed. "I'm a teacher; teachers' don't get into trouble."

"You would be surprised dearest. Now what does this concern?"

"A student of mine has gone missing."

There was a pause on the other side. "A runaway?"

Beatrice shook her head despite knowing her father couldn't see it. "He's not the only one who has gone missing but his entire family seems to have gone underground. There's not a trace left behind and no one seems able to recall their address. He's still signed up for school and I just can't make sense of this. The police was called but without much evidence they soon gave up. He was in the Hospital a month or so ago but vanished after that."

"Does his name happen to be Harry James Potter?" Her dad's voice was uncharacteristically tense.

Beatrice's face furrowed in a frown. "Yes. How did you know?"

"I was the head guard when he broke into the Prison."

Beatrice had forgotten her father worked there and felt her cheeks warm. She shook her head. "Will you help?"

"Yes." There was not a hint of hesitation in her father's voice, no pause to contemplate the decision. "I'll be by your place tomorrow." The line clicked shut and Beatrice was left wondering just what in the world was going on in the life of Harry James Potter and just how he had managed to catch her father's interest.

Ace of Spades

Severus Snape was pacing back and forth in his private rooms at Hogwarts, eyes restlessly fixed on the small vial of periwinkle blue liquid on the table.

"Give it to him, Severus."

He gave a snarl, recalling Dumbledore's words and hating them.

"This vial contains everything Voldemort need to grow even stronger and you want be to waltz right in and give it to him! Are you insane?"

"Perhaps I am, Severus." Dumbledore smiled serenely. "But I believe this is for the best."

"The best? The best! Everything you do is always for the best, for the greater good. Making Voldemort stronger is not for the greater good. Nothing you say will convince me otherwise!" Severus spat furiously.

"But you will do it, will you not my boy?"

"I'm not your boy," Severus grumbled, averting his eyes from gentle blue. "Why Albus?"

"Why do I want you to do this? I cannot tell you that, not today." The old man said regretfully, soul blue eyes shining between golden half-moon glasses.

"Typical." Severus spat, spinning around and marching out of the room with his black robes flaring out behind him.

And now he was waiting for the damned tattoo on his inner left wrist to call him to his master to give him the vial. Severus hated it, he truly did. But he had chosen to follow Dumbledore, had sworn his life to the old man and could only pray that he was right, that he wasn't about to fail Severus and the rest of the world playing his games.

I am just a chess piece in a great evil scheme, Severus thought as he felt the familiar burn on his wrist, but at least I'm not a pawn and that's probably the only thing keeping me from death.

He was already clad in his black robes, metallic mask tucked beneath them and he snatched up the small vial, letting it slink into one of his inner pockets before slamming the door to his privet quarters shut, magic locking it in place and painting falling shut to hide the entrance.

Salazar Slytherin watched from his place in the painting, dark green eyes following the potion master's back.

His steps brought him quickly across the Hogwarts lawn, past Hagrid's hut and past the gates that guarded the great castle. He put on his mask and without as much as a backward glance he spun on his step and disappeared with a low 'crack'.

The magic of the Dark Mark guided him and when the world reappeared before him he was kneeling before Voldemort and he bent his head, kissing the hems of his master's robes. "My lord." He mumbled, quietly, reverently – his disgust hidden and closed behind thick occlumency walls.

"Do you have the vial Severus?" He loathed the way Voldemort's tongue caressed his name. He had once loved it, ready to roll on his back like a dog and beg and plead to hear it again and again. Voldemort was intoxicating even as he looked now, snake like and pale as death with gleaming ruby's for eyes.

"Yes my lord." He brought it up from the depths of his pocket and held it out for his master.

"What is it Master." Bellatrix Lestrange crooned from the right side of the Dark Lord. Severus was thankful for his mask as it hid his grimace of disgust as the wiry black haired witch pressed her breasts against the Dark Lord's back, her thin pale arms coming around to cradle him. Voldemort allowed it. There was no secret that Bellatrix desired Voldemort above anything else and that her marriage to Rodolphus was only of convenience. She had been insane during Voldemort's first reign; Azkaban had only served to drive her further off the edge. She was Voldemort's second in command, she was a witch to fear.

"This my dear Bellatrix is going to bring me back to my full power." Bellatrix's violet eyes shone, eyeing the vial with a hunger that was only matched by Voldemort's own.

"Oh master that is simply wonderful."

Torture, Snape thought mentally as Bellatrix nuzzled closer to the Dark Lord, her long and wild curly black hair falling around them,

there is no need for the cruciatus; I've had my dose – now send me back.

"It is, isn't it?" Voldemort's ruby eyes gleamed. "And it is all thanks to Severus here." Bellatrix gave him a look of disdain, hating him for doing what she considered her job; making her master happy.

Bellatrix existed to please Voldemort.

Voldemort opened the vial and put it to his lips. "I hope you don't disappoint me, Severus." And it was in that moment Snape realized why Bellatrix was in the room. If something happened to Voldemort he was dead, life forfeited. She would make sure he didn't leave the castle alive.

Voldemort threw away the vial and it crashed against one of the walls, splintering into a thousand tiny pieces that clinked to the floor. And before the eyes of Bellatrix and Severus Lord Voldemort began to change.

His skin seemed to bubble and features change, he grew younger, from seventy back to his forty's. His skin changed from the chalky white to a smooth glowing white. Nose and lips reappeared, neat black eyebrows and the harsh aristocratic features of his younger self appeared. Jet black hair grew from his head and his ruby red eyes rolled in his sockets and muscles expanded beneath his skin. Dark magic exploded from him like dark tendrils, caressing the faces of Bellatrix and Severus before curling back and cocooning him, swirling around their master before abruptly disbanding.

And the man left in the seat was hardly to be recognized. Voldemort looked just as he had at his rise during his first reign. Sharp aristocratic features, a strong lean body, skin so pale it shone in the light. Only his eyes remained of his old self, ruby red still instead of the dark black of his youth. He was in his forty's with hair as black as the darkest of shadows.

Long spidery fingers rose to touch the new face.

Bellatrix quivered in hunger as he drank the sight of her master. "You are beautiful master." She purred softly. "Returned to your glory. So strong, so powerful." Voldemort smiled, reviling sharp white teeth.

"Yes..." Voldemort's eyes trailed towards Snape who had remained frozen in place during the transformation. "Remove your mask, Severus." The black haired, sallow skinned man did as told. His face a perfect blank mask, his black hollowed eyes saying nothing. "What do you think of your work, hm, Severus?"

"Perfection." He spoke the truth. It had done exactly what it was supposed to do and never before had the prospect of peace been so far from his mind.

Voldemort smiled eerily and his ruby eyes shone. "You will be rewarded for your faithfulness Severus. Now leave, before the old man decides to check on you." The tattoo on his wrist flared to life as Voldemort opened the wards for him and he vanished with a soft 'crack'.

No sleep came to Severus that night after he reported to Dumbledore. The picture of his master rising to his full glory was burned into his eyelids and he was not looking forward to the next Order meeting.

He's a monster... Severus thought darkly as the firewhiskey burned the back of his throat. A monster masquerading as a man.

Ace of Spades

This had not been written anywhere in her plans when Alice Creed decided to leave the Hospital for what had to be the second time that year. The man pressing against her, drooling and smelling like he'd taken a dip in a pool of piss and breathe reeking. He was ugly and disgusting and Alice didn't want him anywhere near her.

She tried to wrench out of his grip and she bared her teeth in a snarl of irritation when he didn't budge. I knew I shouldn't have left the Hospital! Alice cursed in her mind, hating humans more for every second that ticked past. She was clad in her Hospital clothes, short white shirt and white button-up with a red cross on the left sleeve. Over it she had only pulled a jacket, more accurately Harry James Potter's jacket which she was supposed to return.

Only they still hadn't figured out his address. They just kicked her out and told her to return once he was found. And she was being

paid doing so. Alice knew, just knew that they only wanted her out of the Hospital. It was pitifully obvious. Not even my work is appreciated! She thought furiously.

"¡Hey! Deje solo!" (Hey! Leave her alone!) The new voice, Spanish by the sound of it, made her captor slowly turn around and Alice peered over the drunken man's shoulder. Oh thank heavens, he's got a gun! Now, if he'd only point it slightly to the left to avoid shooting the fuck out of me and everything should be fine and dandy! Her captor made no move to release her, he didn't even seem to comprehend the situation. I just had to go and get myself captured by an idiot. Wonderful. Alice thought dryly.

"He dicho deje solo!" (I said leave her alone!) The man with the gun took a step forward which startled her captor into mirroring him which consequently put him up as the target of her knee. With a snarl Alice brought her knee up, smashing it into the soft organ between his legs. He let go of her with a howl. The man with the gun was fast, whirling past her to slam his elbow into the drunken man's solar plexus before using the handle of the gun to slam it into the man's head, effectively knocking him out with substantial brain damage, if Alice knew her hits well enough.

Caucasian men are officially my new favorite people, Alice decided as he tugged on her hand to lead her out of the alley way, especially violent Caucasian men. The light also brought his appearance to her attention. A thirty year or so Spanish man with brown chin length hair with a slight wave and piercing grey eyes clad in a stylish white long sleeved button-up tucked into brown slacks with a black belt and a vest over it.

"¿Estás bien?" (Are you alright?) He was peering at her closely now, most likely scanning her for injuries.

Alice gave him a blank look. "No comprende." She informed him blithely. Words she had learned in every language just because she liked messing with people.

"You okey, senorita?" Ah, this time she understood.

"Yes." She nodded, smiled a fake smile. "Gracias." She was not a complete idiot.

"¿Cuál es tu nombre?" (What's your name?) She had started to walk but he was beside her before she had even managed three steps. She threw him an annoyed look while mentally sorting through his words.

"Nombre – name?" She peered at him and he stared innocently back. "I'll bet anything you understand English and is only doing this to mess with me." She decided before pointing a finger at her chest. "Alice Creed."

He mimicked her movement. "Luis Vega." His voice was heavy with Spanish accent. Alice gave him a suspicious look.

"Right Mr Vega-" She was cut off by him catching hold of her arm.

"Luis, senorita." He smiled at her.

She gave him a dry look. "In your dreams Mr Vega." She tugged out of his grip. "Now, I'm safe and I'm going home to my messy apartment because I'm sick and tired and don't feel like running around like an idiot because of some kid who decided to disappear without his jacket and my dear fellow workers decided that it would be the perfect excuse to throw me out for a week or two." She began walking.

Luis Vega kept following, grey eyes gleaming curiously. Alice shot him an annoying look as he paused before her door.

"You go home, comprende?" She demanded. Luis cocked his head, looking perfectly innocent. In the silence of the night she could hear his soft breathing and slowly a smile bloomed on her lips. "On the other hand..." She reached out, grabbed hold of him and tugged him inside. "You will do perfectly for the night."

The door clicked shut behind them.

Ace of Spades

"How curious my dear child..." Harry glanced up at Death who gave the illusion of smiling. "A lot of people are looking for you... such concern, it touches me deeply."

"I suppose I should be getting home soon, huh?" Harry murmured, leaning back against Death's legs. "What is it now? November?"

"It is the first of December tomorrow my child." Death caressed the top of his head. "You shall hear my story today... Tomorrow you will depart."

Harry peered up at Death and smiled softly, brushing his mind against Death's. I will miss you, you know that.

I do child. Death assured him softly. But it doesn't make it any easier to let you leave.

I am the Ace of Spades, Harry teased, your card of triumph. He pressed his lips against Death's the top of Death's bony hand. I will always return, be it in death or in life.

The weak are meat, the strong eat.

Life

The lips of the water woman pressed against his in one last kiss of farewell before she turned and vanished into the perfectly circular depths of the dark lake leading to Death. Kneeling on the ground Harry stared after her for a long time even though his eyes could not see beneath the surface.

"She was my only companion for so many years. She was created long before death was a concept and mankind an idea..."

It had been strange and unnerving to listen to the story and creation of Death. A being who had come into existence with a task but no instructions and who had spent years in solitude before the calling of the dead split him and he was forcefully torn from the cave which within he had come into existence.

The split... Harry had wondered how Death could be in thousands of places at the same time and apparently he had been created with the ability to split his souls for mankind's demands.

"I was once human. Not human in the sense that you are, were, should have been. I looked like a human, walked like a human, felt like a human and experienced like a human. I had the working organs and soft skin, the hair and the pounding heart but I wasn't human. Not truly. Not in the sense that humans experience themselves."

Death, a skeleton clad in black. It didn't match up with the picture Death painted in the stories and Harry hated the longing he heard in Death's voice.

"I broke the rules... And they tore away my illusion of humanity."

Straightening up Harry shook his jeans free of the pollen from the flowers, careful not to inhale it, and slipped them on. They slunk down on his hips immediately and he grimaced in displeasure. There was no concept of time in the halls of Death and hunger had been far from his mind. At best he'd been munching on some apple or two courtesy of Death.

His keen eyes noted that his skin was a shade or so lighter as well from his time in darkness as he shrugged on his t-shirt. His jacket was nowhere to be found, to his displeasure, as he noted the falling snow outside the meadow. It was the first of December and he was finally returning home... courtesy of Death.

Harry allowed himself a smug smile. Really, Death was the reason magic existed. Death that had fallen in love with a human and brought a smidge of his power into the race of humans... It was only reasonable that he would be able to overcome the Fidelius charm.

The Order of the Phoenix can be found at the Potter Mansion at Godric's Hollow.

Harry sighed as he stepped out of the meadow and from several directions owls perked up as they caught hold of his signature.

"I had been alone for such a long time that my first meeting with humans was just a whirl of fear, shock and horror as these creatures evaporated upon coming in contact with me. I did not know it then but I was sending them off to the next life. All I was aware of and saw was their disappearance and it fuelled fear and sadness through me. I looked like them... So why wasn't I allowed to touch them? They were all pressing against each other to get to me but I... I was different. And that was all I could see..."

Wrapping his arms around his chest to ward out the cold Harry steered his steps in the direction of his bike, cursing the cold and the snow. He paused as he caught sight of Hedwig sweeping down towards him and was nearly barreled over by a much relieved owl that cooed and nipped at his skin and when he finally managed to straighten up she delivered a smack with her wing and glared reproachfully at him.

"Hey to you to Hedwig my dear." Harry said dryly, scratching her gently behind her ear, a small smile tugging at the edge of his lips. "I see you missed me... And apparently so has others." He untied the letter at her leg and felt a pang as he realized it was from Angelina Johnson. "Damn it." He dragged a hand through his hair before unfolding it.

Blackbird,

Katie says you do not know who I am and your letter said as much but I know already that it is a lie. You can call it a feeling or whatever, I do not care. But still I write to you, do you wonder why? I will not tell you... at least not now. I do not know much about you... if anything at all. I do not want your name or description of how you look. But send me a single word next time that describes you and I shall consider further contact with you.

Eclipse.

Harry blinked and quirked a smirk. "I see you haven't let the world win just yet..." He patted his pockets for his pen as he turned the parchment. He hesitated just for a moment, a second before scratching down his response.

Eclipse,

Death.

Blackbird.

"Let's see how you respond to that..." He murmured, retying the letter to the snowy owl perched on his shoulder. She butted her head against his with a sharp nip to his nose before launching herself off with strong wings.

It didn't take long before more owls were arriving and Harry found a letter from his parents and Sirius and from Daniel as well as Hermione and Ron and even Katie who had tried to get a reach of him. The letter from Bill was a surprise and so was the one from Tonks who told him to haul his ass home. They all basically said the same thing, expresses of their worry and concern as well as apology and a plea to find a way to contact them as well as suggestions as to how.

It was, however, the letter from Luna who left him bemused with an urge to laugh and fondness rose within him as he traced the fingers prints in yellow that spelled out the letters: Forgiveness.

"John..." Harry felt the snowflakes on his skin as he tilted his head to the sky.

"I was so afraid..."

Wrapping his arms around his chest to ward out the cold Harry steered his steps in the direction of his bike. He had something that needed straightened out before he managed to drive himself up the walls with anxiety and swirling fears.

Seven owls rose to the sky with the same response: I am back.

Ace of Spades

"Harry is dead."

John couldn't see anything through the haze of rage that threatened to envelope him at the words of his mom. His nails dug into the soft skin of his arms and he was oblivious to the pain as they pierced the skin to draw blood. The felt the hot tears and white hot furry rose with the sickening taste of bile in the back of his throat.

His mom had lied to him. It didn't matter how much a time had passed since she first uttered the words, they filled him with the same sense of betrayal and it ate at him. John couldn't even stand to look in her face, hating the hatred he saw associated with the one person he loved more than any other.

Harry wasn't dead. Harry was gone. And he had vanished off with the false knowledge of that John didn't care. He knew he should have pressed and asked the doctors but he'd been so engulfed in his sorrow and disbelief that everything but his grief had been blocked out.

"I'm so selfish." John choked, torn between laughing and sobbing like a child. He wanted Harry... The need was so great, so furious that he could even se the illusion of his beloved brother nearing him on his beloved bike... coming to a skidding half and removing his helmet and-

John was already up and running before the image had been processed.

There was a shadow of surprise in his brother's face that brought such a loathing through him that for a moment John felt a white hot rage that blinded him and his disgust for his mom reached new

heights as he threw himself into the arms of his big brother which had opened to welcome him.

John sobbed and screamed and begged for forgiveness. "I love you!" He cried despairingly, headless to Harry's soaked shirt and the frozen arms that cradled him almost painfully against the familiar chest. "I love you, I love you, I love you, I love-"

Chapped lips pressed against his hair and for a moment everything was perfect as John cried from months of bottled grief and the sheer relief that swallowed him up.

Harry tightened his hold and held him through it all.

Ace of Spades

"You are infuriating Spaniard." Alice decided as she rummaged through her kitchen drawers. Nonetheless she had slept through the night perfectly content and if she was so be honest with herself she had enjoyed the perfect acceptance in his face as she told him to sleep in her bed while curling up at the foot of it on the floor. He seemed perfectly content to go with what she wanted.

It was refreshing in a way Alice refused to put into words. "Is egg alright with you?" She settled for showing it instead. Alice had never been a woman of word but rather of thought and action. Luis Vega regarded her for a second before slowly pointing to the fridge with an inquisitive look. "Go ahead..." Alice rolled her eyes and turned her back to the Spaniard that turned to the fridge with a hungry look.

Fifteen minutes later Alice sat faced with Luis Vega who had pilfered her fridge of its content and was digging in with a smile that said that he was very satisfied.

Alice could only roll her eyes as she ate her egg and bacon. Luis was silent as he ate and Alice found herself relaxing against her will. Silence was profound and rare and she could close her eyes and drift away to the Spaniard's breathing. It was perfect and Alice felt content as everything but the sound faded from her mind.

"Do you have a place to stay?" Alice surprised herself by interrupting the silence. Luis Vega regarded her with a look that said that he had

not understood a word. Pursuing her lips Alice rose and left for the living room.

It was a simple room, painted dark grey with dark green bookcases filled to the brim with books on languages. She only picked certain words and phrases from each language but still she bought the books. She didn't waste her money on computers or television. Finding the Spanish section she withdrew one of the lexicons and slid back into place before Luis Vega whose eyes sparkled in amusement at the sight of it.

Flipping through the book Alice soon found the words she was looking for and caring not if she butchered the language made it into a rough sentence. "¿Tiene un lugar para quedarse?" (Do you have a place to stay?) Her tongue stumbled over the words but she seemed to have gotten her point across because there was a glimmer of comprehension in the other's eyes.

"Si." The Spaniard smiled. "Con usted."

Alice flipped through the book and she pursed her lips as she found the translation. "With me?" Luis Vega nodded while scaling an orange Alice had no idea how he'd gotten his hands on. "And what makes you think I will allow you to stay?" He gave her a flat look and she rolled her eyes before scanning for a translation. "¿Y qué te hace pensar que le permitirá reservar?" She said slowly, glancing up at him.

The Spaniard smiled, revealing a row of perfect white teeth. "¿Qué te hace pensar que no?" (What makes you think you won't?).

Ace of Spades

"Jag vill vara din, Margareta-,"

"Tonks..." Moody growled, blue eye spinning in its socket.

"Bara vara din, ska du veta-"

"TONKS!" He snapped. The girl let out an odd 'eep' like sound and tumbled off her chair, papers following her. Her lavender hair turned bright red in embarrassment as she slowly turned towards her

mentor and catching sight of his expression hurriedly scrambling to her feet.

"Sorry," she squeaked. "But those Swedish songs are simply addicting-,"

"Tonks..." Moody growled and the girl snapped her mouth shut and Moody held up a paper for her to view. The cheerful girl paled as she read it and at the end her legs folded beneath her and she sunk down in the chair behind her.

"Fifty ministry personnel dead... The Minister... dead?" Her hair had gone white and her skin was ashen. "How?" She demanded. Moody was cut out from answering by three steady knocks from the front door.

The old Auror growled as he rose from the table. They were the only ones at the Potter Mansion and all members had been instructed on how to knock before entering. That was not it and the two drew their wands, bodies tense as Moody traced the air and the lock clicked open.

The form that greeted them was far from expected. "Don't shoot?" Harry cocked his head, grinning like a shark.

"Harry?" Tonks squeaked, shocked.

"How did you know about this location?" Moody growled, not relaxing for a second.

Harry held his hands where the other two could see them as he rolled his shoulders in a light shrug. "It might be because this is my home?" He said innocently.

"Prove it." Moody snarled.

Harry's eyes trailed to Tonks and he quirked an eyebrow, smirking. "Well... the day you delivered my gun I had a guest in my room trying to wake me up and unfortunately she hadn't quite anticipated my reaction, really, people should stop sneaking up on me in the-," Tonks had crossed the distance between them before he could finish the sentence, face red as she smacked her hand across his mouth.

"That's him." Tonks squeaked at Moody's look. Her gruff mentor rolled both eyes but reluctantly stepped aside to let Harry inside. The door clicked shut behind him and the boy shook his snow covered head, shivering as he wrapped his arms around himself.

"Damn cold..." He snatched an old sweater from one of the crooks in the hall and shrugged it on with a sigh of relief under the watchful eyes of both Aurors. He meandered into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of apple juice and putting it into the microwave. Tonks wrinkled her nose.

"So where have you been Harry?" She asked semi casually in the door opening to the kitchen.

"Here and there." The boy answered dismissively. Tonks gave him a look and he rolled his eyes. "First I was in the Hospital and then I was out of the Hospital. Where did you think I was?"

"The muggle world?" Tonks suggested wryly.

"The muggle world." Harry agreed. "At least for a while." His eyes shimmered with emotions none of the Aurors could pinpoint and though the tone of his voice it was made apparent that that was as far as he was going to explain it.

"Do your parents know you're back?" Tonks after a moment as Harry removed his juice from the microwave.

"I owed them, yes. But we all know that that might take some time." Harry said absently. "I would really like to take a nap before facing the explosion, if you will. It's been some time since I had a decent nap and it's almost midnight, I'm exhausted." He cracked his neck with a sigh.

He didn't look very health. Tonks eyes took in the dark circles under his eyes, the jeans that were just about falling off his hips and though he was still muscled it was clear that he had lost weight. There was a pallor to his skin and he was obviously frozen no matter how he tried to hide it. "Yeah, I'll fend them off." She grinned at him, tried to hide the worry in her eyes as he saluted her weekly before leaving the room.

Moody and Tonks stood in silence until the door upstairs clicked shut.

"Did you believe him?" Moody asked gruffly.

"Not for a second." Tonks frowned. "He has enough contacts in the muggle world to keep himself healthy. Whatever he's been doing it's been far from relaxing and there's obviously something on his mind. Judging by the tears on his chest I would bet money on that he's made up with John and there's a fair chance that he's feeling guilty about killing that muggle boy even if it was to defend someone."

"No, he's not feeling guilty about killing." Moody said gruffly and Tonks glanced at him curiously but her mentor was not more forthcoming than that.

"I don't get it how he got past the Fidelius charm." She crossed her arms across her chest. "It shouldn't be possible. Someone would have sent a message or arrived with him if he had been found and Dumbledore are the only one who can give out the secret."

Moody was silent for a moment and Tonks watched her mentor curiously. "Contact Dumbledore," he said at last. "But do not contact the Potters yet. The boy said he'd been sending out owls so we can be sure to hear from most of the people involved by tomorrow morning. We won't be getting anymore out of him today."

Ace of Spades

It was a repeat of action that kicked Hermione into gear. She had been caught unaware last time but this time her mind was ready and when the wiry arms grabbed hold of her and drew her in she twisted and slammed her knee into Lawliet's groin. Any other male would have bent doubt but Lawliet was still holding her when her mind caught up with her actions and she realized the Slytherin was once again acting as her kidnapper and her chest was pressed up against his as he carried her inside the empty classroom.

His face was twisted in a grimace as he let her down and with a discrete flick of his wand the door clicked shut and wards settled in the room. Hermione was impressed but refused to show it, backing

up as he prowled closer and felt her cheeks redden as he backed her up against the wall. "Granger."

His rough rolling tone sent a shiver down her spine but she refused to show it, back straight and head held proudly as she stared into his eyes. "Rosier." She matched his tone, smooth and erotic in sound yet with a tone that made it clear that she wanted him nowhere near her. "Is kidnapping a hobby of yours?"

A smirk of approval stretched across his face. "Only when it comes to mudbloods." He pressed closer, aligning his body with hers while staring down at her with keen eyes that shone with dark intelligence. "Have you spoken to the Potter boy yet?"

Hermione was acutely aware of his beating heart and warmth and never before had the Slytherin felt so human to her. "No, I was waiting for your... approval."

"Good." Lawliet breathed, white teeth gleaming as he smiled. "Then everything is going as we planned...?"

"Yes." Hermione pursed her lips. "Was that all or is there something more you wanted?" Hermione tensed as strong palms pressed against her hips and pulled her closer, molding their bodies together. She opened her mouth to ask just what the hell he was playing at but rough lips had already descended and were enclosing her own.

Hermione stood frozen eyes wide as one hand shifted from hip to face, gently, teasingly stroking along her side before tilting her head as the Slytherin deepened the kiss and a tongue brushed against her lips. His other hand pressed against her lower back, slipping beneath her t-shirt and the warmth of his palm made her skin burn. Her mind kicked into overdrive and she closed her lips and pushed against his chest. Her power was nothing against his but he complied, eyes gleaming as he withdrew and stepped back and Hermione was acutely aware of her own pounding heart and quickened breathing and she resisted the urge to reach up and touch her lips.

"Consider it a thank you." Lawliet leaned down and she turned her head to the side. His lips pressed against her burning cheek, lingering just a second too long. "Take care mudblood."

Ace of Spades

Alexander Thames giggled to himself as he went deeper into the forest, Optimus Prime toy zooming through the air as he made the appropriate sound effects for the Transformers. Crawling beneath a fallen tree he imagined the red and blue bot to be in the middle of a battle field and he rolled and dived with it to avoid the evil Decepticon leaf that spiraled from above and lurked in hordes on the ground.

He wasn't aware of the new pair of eyes watching him and remained oblivious as he gathered a handful of snow to build a tiny snowman which he stuck two leaf into to give it wings. "All Autobots gather together to defeat the stupid Starscream!" He commanded in a static like voice as he crouched behind a large rock, aiming Optimus Prime carefully before launching it through the air. He whooped loudly as the red and blue robot toy collided with the tiny snowman, crushing it beneath its weight. "And so the Decepticon army is defeated – no wait! It's the evil Megatron who has returned as Galvatron and he's here to steal all the candy-,"

And that's as far as Alexander got. As the six year old had bent down to create a new, larger, snowman his watcher had crept forward and its shadow crept over the child that jerked in surprise and spun around to find a woman with wild black hair twirling a thin piece of wood in her hand while regarding him in sick amusement. "Hello there little muggle boy," she crooned. "What do you say about playing with Aunt Bellatrix instead of that stupid toy?"

"Optimus Prime isn't stupid!" Alexander's fear was overridden by his indignation on the behalf of his favorite toy. "He's really kind and he always defeat the evil Decepticons! He's really strong and I bet he could squish you!" He scowled at the woman. "And mommy says not to talk to strangers and you are a stranger and not my aunt so leave me alone!" He turned his back to her with a huff.

He didn't see the strange woman's eyes darken in indignation but felt the point of the stick she held in his back and heard the word that for months ahead would make him scream: "Crucio."

Family means no one gets left behind.

Family Matters

There was something unsettling about waking up in a bed after spending over a month sleeping on the hard cold stone floor of Death's cave and the month before that in a sterile hospital bed with a sleeping nurse at the foot of it. The snuffling sound of Lupa deep asleep, little paws paddling the air with little odd yelps ever so often as she dreamt and the snuffling sound of her nose as she breathed. She lay on his bare chest like a fluff of warmth and he was startled at how much she had grown during his absence and ashamed he hadn't spent her more thought. The collar around her neck was a reminder of his own and he lifted it from the bedside table, stroking his thumb over the metal and feeling guilty.

Childish, was the word that came to mind and he winced. After a moment of hesitation he removed the smooth metal with 'Master' engraved and put it aside before buttoning it up around his neck. He brushed away a fringe of black hair from his eyes and encircled Lupa in his arms, holding her close as he sat up. She startled awake at the movement and in a matter of seconds Harry had her paws on his chest as she stretched up to slobber his face in wet dog kisses, tail going high spin. He chuckled, nuzzling his face against hers and scratching her neck, ears and belly and he soon had her wrestled down as he growled and nipped playfully at her ears and as they tumbled down at the floor he swiped at her playfully.

Lupa for her part was having the time of her life, tongue lolling and eyes shining as she scrambled to dive out of his way as he crawled, swiped and lunged for her. He managed to draw her out from beneath his bed and soon had her on her back, belly up in submission, tail still wagging as Harry scratched it. As his hand got near her mouth to scratch between her eyes she gave it a good swipe with her tongue and rolling back to her feet buried her face into his stomach as he continued to scratch her neck, back and ears.

There were a lot at stake, Harry decided, on how the coming confrontation would play out. Death had not offered him a way out for his sudden knowledge of the Order Headquarters and since Harry would rather avoid mentioning Death's involvement at all there really was no explanation to offer. So what was he supposed to say?

His disappearance was easily enough explained but the rest...? Harry cradled Lupa close and buried his face into his dark fur with a deep sigh.

He did not look forward to the coming confrontation.

And unfortunately for him it came all too soon.

Harry was not at all surprised to hear the voices down below accompanying the slamming of a door and a clear demanding voice followed by hurried footfalls up the stairs. Harry lifted his face from Lupa's fur and straightened slightly as he leaned his back against his bed in an eerie copy of Alice Creed and waited. Harry was nothing if not perspective and the footfalls had been easily identified as his godfather's so when Sirius came bursting through Harry wasn't surprised.

He was, however, surprised as the man came to a halt before him, bedraggled and unshaved as he collapsed to his knees and pulled Harry into a shockingly strong hug. Lupa escaped from his arms and Sirius tightened his hold further and Harry could feel him trembling.

Did I... cause this? Harry thought dimly as he put his chin on Sirius shoulder and after a brief moment of hesitation enveloped the man as well. I didn't want to hurt anyone... Harry thought. I was safe and they must have presumed I was in the muggle world so I don't understand why...?

"I thought you were dead." Sirius grief-stricken voice caused a pang to go through him. "I thought... I thought..." But Sirius didn't seem to be capable to get forth what he'd been thinking for he buried his face in Harry's shoulder with a howl, his fingers tense as claws as he dug them into Harry's back. Harry was bare-chested and he felt the prickle of blood on his back.

"Siri..." The man tensed in his arms for reasons Harry couldn't comprehend. What's been happening while I was gone? Harry thought with a frown as he tugged at the ends of his godfather's black hair. "I missed you." He admitted but held his arms in place, entrapping the man as he made a move as if to straighten out to be able to look at Harry.

"You don't allow anyone to see."

The word's felt as if they had been told to him ages ago but rang as clear and through as a warning bell through is mind. He wasn't allowed to let people see... but he was allowed to let people hear.

"You have always been close to me and you are, perhaps, the only one in our family who hasn't turned your back towards me faced with what I am." It took to admit that but Harry plowed on. "Things have started to change lately... with the war... and I know how important Daniel is to it so I never saw anything wrong with how you put him before me, Siri, it was only natural."

Harry would have continued, would have explained but Sirius had wrenched himself from his grip and Harry found himself pinned to the floor. "Natural!" Sirius hissed. "There is nothing natural about being able to choose one boy over another no matter what they are destined to!" Sirius snarled. Lupa growled softly in the background, watching the man assault her charge in worry, ears flat and pulled back.

"But it is!" Harry bared his teeth, not liking the turn of events. It felt too much like Anthony all over again and his muscles were taut. "Daniel is destined to save the fucking world and I'm nothing more than a muggle boy! Of course he would be put first for my death would be nothing compared to his-"

Sirius palm collided with Harry's cheek with a sound that rung in the following silence. Sirius was breathing hard and shaking as Harry slowly turned his eyes to meet the grey ones of his godfather.

"Don't say that." Sirius breathed, eyes burning. "Don't you ever say your death would mean nothing." He swallowed. "For it would mean everything to me."

"Siri-"

"Don't." Harry's muscles tensed even further as Sirius collapsed upon him. "Just... don't." He sounded exhausted, as if all life had been sucked out off him. Harry felt the smell of unwashed flesh and the deep rings beneath his godfather's eyes were a clear sign that the man hadn't been taking care of himself.

"Neither of us has..." Harry sighed as the soft snoozing sounds of his godfather reached his ears and reaching out he fumbled for the cover and managed to pull it down on top of them. Making himself reasonable comfortable on the floor Harry closed his eyes and forced himself back to sleep.

The next time he awoke it was dark and he was alone. He had been moved to his bed and he wondered how in the world he had managed to sleep through it. He felt well rested however and everything was clear to his overworked brain. Rubbing his eyes he glanced blearily at his wrist watch and grimaced. It was four hours to midnight which meant that his sleep would be nicely turned upside down.

Struggling out of his covers he stretched his arms above his head as he padded across the room to his wardrobe. It was strange seeing clothes again, which was a strange feeling in itself, Harry decided. There were just something very natural about walking around naked with a being that was nothing more than a skeleton. To think that Death once looked human, Harry thought as he pulled yellow t-shirt with print over his head followed by loosely fit jeans. He pulled forth white socks and paused, staring at them.

It was no secret that Harry had an obsession with white socks. There had been a delightful situation years back when Daniel's accidental magical had turned them all blue and as his mom tried to force him into wearing them he had screamed himself into a right fit which had left his parents horrified and never again had there been another color among his socks. Harry couldn't put his mind to why the thought of anything but white socks horrified him and made him nauseous... they just did.

He was only human, after all.

Slipping them on Harry ruffled his hair and grimaced. "Time to face the music..."

Ace of Spades

Albus Dumbledore was frowning, blue eyes gazing out the small window of his office into the dark night sky. How was it that an ordinary muggle boy had gotten past the Fidilium charm? There was

no explanation. Only he could pass out the secret and he hadn't seen the boy since before the charm was put in place.

There was no rhyme or reason to the situation and it made him worry that, perhaps, there was a leak. The truth laid with the boy who was deep in sleep and his parents hadn't allowed anyone to wake him. He had been informed that Sirius had talked to the boy but that he had fallen asleep soon after that.

Waiting, always waiting. He sighed. Two days now, he was growing worried. Things just weren't going as he planned.

Daniel wasn't causing too much trouble though and that was a small relief. Astonishingly enough it had been reported that it had been Mr Weasley who had gotten into detention with Umbridge and not the other way around and apparently Daniel could mostly be found with his book buried in the same book. A thin muggle book entitled Notes From Underground by Fyodor Dostoyevsky which seemed to have been sent to him by his muggle brother.

The things around Harry Potter seemed to be thickening and Albus wasn't liking this new unknown factor. But perhaps he was just feeling paranoid – and what was wrong with a boy sending a book to his brother as a gift? It was keeping Daniel out of trouble after all...

Albus sighed. "I'm getting much too old for this my friend." Fawkes squawked and swooped down from his perch to settle on Albus shoulder. The old wizard raised an eyebrow at his old friend and chuckled. "Perhaps you are right... Perhaps he is a welcome factor."

Fawkes made an odd sound which sounded suspiciously like a laugh and Albus eyes twinkled. "Of course, a muggle boy would never join up with Tom." Fawkes chirped his affirmative. "But what if there is an unknown third factor that we do not know about?" Fawkes tilted his head, seemed to contemplate before crooning his response. "Yes... Yes, I suppose you're right. First I talk to the boy and then I make the decisions."

Fawkes butted his head against the old wizard's cheek, eyes reproachful and Albus chuckled, stroking the red and golden bird over his head. "I meant us of course." He corrected himself and Fawkes chirped.

The flames of his fireplace burst to life suddenly and Albus and Fawkes turned expectantly towards it.

The face of James Potter popped up, grimaced but relieved. "He's awake." He said shortly and vanished off before either could make a move. The two friends exchanged glances and nodded. Tightening his claws on the old wizard's robes Fawkes flamed them to the Potter residence.

What awaited them was a tense atmosphere.

Harry had placed himself strategically near the stairs in a black leather seat and was watching his parents with dark green eyes that said all and nothing. Lily and James were standing and Nymphadora and Alastor were placed strategically enough to interfere should anything get out of hand.

Albus suddenly felt very, very old.

Fawkes perked up on his shoulder, black eyes zeroing on the child in the room and the phoenix cocked his head to the side in blatant curiosity. He crooned questioningly at the ancient magic he felt coming from the pocket of the child's jeans and though he felt Albus confused eyes on him Fawkes didn't bother to explain as he launched himself from his companion's shoulder and landed smoothly on the child's.

He didn't jerk or tense, to Fawkes extreme satisfaction, and intelligent eyes met his own. He squawked, wanted to know why the child was saturated with the smell of Death but finding no understanding or explanation forthcoming.

If phoenixes could pout he would've.

Butting his head against the child's head he nipped at the inky black strands and sung softly for the age old soul trapped inside. As Fawkes peered into the eyes that made him think of the depths of lush forests he decided that this secret would be kept between the child and himself. Shifting on the shoulder he gave his companion an expectant look.

Albus studied the boy on the couch, taking in the differences and similarities between the two brothers. Daniel had visited his office

many times through the years and Albus saw him each day at breakfast, lunch and dinner. But this boy who spent much of his time in the muggle world he had only viewed shortly and hastily before other than at the disastrous order meeting during the summer months.

He had to admit he admired what he saw. Harry was undoubtedly handsome with the same messy black hair as his brother and father but with the fierce emerald green eyes of his mother that shone with the same intensity and intelligence but with a wariness that Lily's had never contained. He was stronger built than his brother and Albus had heard the rumors about the boy's active living in the forest and Lily and James had mentioned different muggle sports on occasion. He had obviously lost weight, however, and the smudges beneath his eyes spoke of sleepless nights.

He looked and held himself like a leader, eyes gleaming in challenge as he met Albus eyes head on.

It was hard to imagine that the boy before him had killed someone. It had been to protect his young muggle friend, Albus knew, and he admired that even if he found the action of killing unnecessary. The foolishness of youth, he thought with a deep sigh. There were a lot to be recognized of himself in the boy but rather than growing frustrated with his burdens this boy was taking it and dragging it on his own.

"Harry." He greeted.

The boy inclined his head. "Albus." It startled him to be addressed by his first name and perhaps the boy gleamed it through his eyes for he hitched an eyebrow almost questioningly. Of course this boy wasn't going to address him as Headmaster and since he had referred to the boy by his given name it was only natural that the boy would be allowed the same. It put them on a more stable, equal, ground.

"You want answers." The boy said simply, bluntly. "But I cannot promise to give them all." Honesty; Albus had to appreciate that.

Albus opened his mouth to question what he wanted to know the most but it seemed that Lily wasn't quite capable of delaying her own anymore. "Where were you?" Her voice was frail, unlike Albus

calm but strong voice and Harry's smooth voice that demanded attention.

Harry glanced at his mom, saw the regret in her eyes and the glazy haze of tears and held back the lies that rested on the tip of his tongue. "The muggle world." He said after a moment and Fawkes butted his head against his, urging him. "At least during my Hospital visit." He said heavily. "I cannot tell you where I was after that."

"I take it you were with someone." Moody grunted, both eyes trained on the boy.

He hesitated. "Technically, I suppose." He shrugged. It didn't make the situation any clearer and the adults exchanged looks.

"Could you explain that particular statement?" Albus asked softly. The boy's eyes flickered towards him before rolling towards the ceiling as he dragged a hand through his hair in a motion he'd clearly copied from his father. They rolled back to the floor and he sighed.

"I do not want to lie to you; I'm a firm believer in karma." Harry drummed his fingers against his knee. "But I cannot tell you everything, I already said so. But this someone who helped me get past the Fidelius charm, and I admit he did," he added as Moody straightened and Tonks looked downright alarmed, "won't be planning your death's anytime soon, that I can promise." He will just be there to welcome you with open arms at the end of life.

"How do we know you speak the truth boy?" Moody growled, disliking the thought of someone with such an ability immensely. But it was a male character, that much the boy had let it slip – if only he could press the boy for more...

"You don't." Harry said simply. "You'll just have to trust my word for it."

Moody turned towards Albus who was looking pensive as he studied the boy. "Albus, you cannot allow this." He growled. "Surely Veritaserum-"

But that was as far as he got before he found himself drawing his wand in automatic response to the one that had leveled itself

towards him. Lily's eyes were blazing and her hand trembling but she did not falter for a second. "You will not use Veritaserum on my son." Her eyes were ablaze with fury.

"Please lower your wand Lily. I would not agree to dose a muggle boy with Veritaserum, the aftermath could be disastrous." Albus said heavily. Lily sent Moody a heavy glare but complied, stepping back into the comfort of her husband. She dared a glance at Harry and was surprised to find his lips quirked in a semblance of a thankful if not surprised smile. Lily smiled shakily back, straightening her back and squaring her shoulders.

"Harry." The boy's eyes turned back to Albus who gazed steadily into his eyes and prodded his mind ever so slightly with Legilimens. "Are you sure this man does not mean us any harm?" He asked heavily. "Can you say that and mean it."

Harry didn't break eye contact for a moment as he replied. "Yes." It was no lie; whoever this person was Harry believed in them and that was all they could accept for now. Veritaserum could very well destroy his mind and Albus wouldn't risk him like that. Also, using Legimence on the son of Lily and James Potter... They, not to mention Harry, would never forgive him for such a breach of trust and the aftermath could be disastrous.

Fawkes nipped Harry's ear before fluttering over back to Albus who welcomed him with a wrinkled hand stroking over red and gold feathers. Fawkes chirped and Albus inclined his head subtly in agreement. "Lily, James." His old students looked over at him. "I'll be leaving your son in your capable hands. Alastor, Nymphadora - what do you two say about follow me back to Hogwarts for dinner?"

It wasn't really request; all in the room knew it.

Lily and James watched Harry and Harry watched Lily and James as the fire place flared to life behind them. Soon it was only the three of them left in the house and the silence was like a heavy, ominous blanket.

Harry rose from the couch, putting him at even height with his parents. "We have a lot to talk about, huh?" Harry said grimly.

"Yes son," James agreed heavily, looking twenty years older, "there is a lot we need to discuss."

They mutually agreed on the kitchen and Harry snatched up a red apple that he rolled in his hand. "Empire. My favorite." He tossed it in the air, caught it and took a large bite of it, feeling suddenly starved.

"Would you want me to make something for you?" Lily asked hesitantly as he finished off the apple quickly and he went for another one.

Harry paused. "Very well." He stepped back and sunk down in the closest chair. James took the one across from him while Lily rummaged through the fridge for ingredients for a salami and brie sandwich. The kitchen was silent, broken only by breathing and Lily's movements. She split an apple and put it beside the sandwich on the plate and after a brief mental debate fetched a can of Coca Cola and placed it all before her son.

How did it come to this? Lily wondered as she watched her son eat as if he hadn't seen food in weeks. All because of Voldemort and that stupid prophecy... Lily's eyes darkened and she lowered her eyes towards the floor. I wish things would have been different...

Harry guzzled down the fizzy drink and sighed, cracking his neck and dragging a hand through his shaggy hair. Lily made a mental note to see if she could get him to cut it later on.

"Let's not begin this with an awkward 'so'." Harry leaned forward. "I think we've been needing this conversation for a long time and we already know what we need to discuss."

"You're right." James agreed.

"Aren't I always?" Harry joked weakly and his dad's lips twitched at the effort. "So where should we begin? The war? Daniel-"

"You." It was Lily who interrupted him and his eyes slid towards her. "We're beginning with you and us." Harry inclined his head in agreement. Lily fiddled with her sleeve. "We haven't been the best parents... have we?" She said after a moment, regret clear.

Harry gave her a keen look. "I will say to you what I said to Sirius whenever I was awake. It is only natural." He reached up, touching his still stinging cheek. "Just... listen, ok?" He asked of them.

"Of course." They both agreed, staring expectantly at their son.

They're my parents, Harry thought as he took a deep breath. And I am not a cruel person... Holding grudges isn't my thing, not when the fault has only been done to me. "I have always been aware of how you favored Daniel, even if I did not at first understand it. Just as I have always been aware of my lack of magic and belonging. I am... different," he glanced up, meeting his mom's tear-filled eyes, "we live in different worlds and I know I find it hard to be a part of the magical world... just like you must find it hard to be a part of the muggle world."

He drummed his fingers against his knee, brown furrowing thoughtfully. "I'm not trying to make you feel guilty. I have always loved Daniel and I understand fully the reasons you favor him for now that I'm older. The chances of Daniel dying in this damn war... is high. Higher than I wish and spending as much time as possible with Daniel as he grew up must have been very important..." Harry smiled sadly at them. "As for my lack of magic..."

"It's my fault!" Lily was trembling as both son and husband turned towards her incredulously. "It must be," she choked miserably, "James comes from a long line of purebloods and I'm nothing more than a mudblood-"

"Lily!"

"Mom!"

Both son and father were looking aghast at the red haired woman but Lily merely shook her head, tears slipping down her face.

"How can you believe such a thing Lily-flower?" James asked his wife incredulously. "If anything it's my blood that's heavy with traces of inbreeding." He said bitterly.

"Is that really what you think...?" Harry had always prided himself at being good at reading people but this was news to him. Neither of

his parents would meet his eyes and he sagged in his chair in disbelief.

"You took my magic."

Harry remembered the realization in Death's cave and felt a heavy feeling in his stomach. With magic... Harry would have died. Without it his family had been torn apart by guilt. So it all comes spiraling back to this, Harry thought heavily.

"I do not blame you, you know that – right?" He doubted that they did but he needed them to understand. "I love John and life in the muggle world. It is my world," he said earnestly, "and I wouldn't change it for anything."

"But what about our world?" Lily asked, brushing tears away from her eyes. "You're as much a part of it as you are of the muggle world."

"I might have grown up trapped between two worlds but you know as well as I do that the muggle world has been favored." Harry said gently. He didn't like seeing his mom in tears like this... because of him. "I will always be a part of the magical world, you are here after all but I will not spend forever in it."

Lily choked weakly on her tears. "When did you become so grown-up?" Her voice trembled and James draped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. "How did I miss it?"

"Life has a funny way of playing out." Harry said wisely. "Things happen, you grow."

"You know we love you son." James said hesitantly. "No matter what, you know that- don't you?"

Perhaps you love me, but I will always be second... Always. "I know." But perhaps I'm alright with that... perhaps it's for the best.

They did not hug; one talking did not change everything and there were much to come in the future. But they all agreed that the first step had been taken and they could only hope that the next would be following in the right direction.

After all; action speaks louder than words.

Few are those who see with their own eyes and feel with their own hearts.

My Beating Heart

Two days after the talk with his parents Harry left the house to venture in the muggle world. Lupa trotted by his side, tail wagging as she sniffed the ground in exploration of all the different smells that saturated the air. John was at school but Harry had been allowed the rest of the term off thanks to his parents who wanted him home now that Christmas was creeping closer.

Snow fell from above and covered the ground and Harry watched in amusement as Lupa breathed in a nose full and promptly sneezed.

It was a nice day, but Harry very much missed his jacket as he tugged his dad's closer around himself.

"YOU!" Harry paused, mainly because he recognized the voice although she hadn't appeared as one of the most talkative persons last time he'd seen her.

He was not prepared for her body to barrel into his. Sent sprawling in the snow a weight settled itself neatly on his lower back, pressing his arms against his body with surprisingly strong legs. Harry could probably get away if he wanted to but he had gotten to know the woman fairly well and knew that was probably exactly what she wanted. Alice Creed came across as a very... resourceful woman.

Harry quirked a grin despite himself as he twisted his head to meet her peering eyes. "Hello Alice." He would have taken pleasure in the twitch of her eyebrow if it weren't for the material spied on her slight form. "My jacket!" He blurted out in shock and Alice's mouth twisted.

"Yes, your jacket." She fiddled with the hair in his neck. "So pray tell why the hell I'm wearing it."

"... Because you stole it?" Harry fibbed with a raised eyebrow. Alice reddish eyes darkened and Harry was oddly remained of blood. He coughed awkwardly. "Because I forgot it at the Hospital?" He tried again. Alice pinched his ear, earning a yelp from the younger boy and Alice smirked in satisfaction.

"¿Quién es él?" (Who is he?) Luis tilted his head curiously behind Alice.

"Yo soy el amo del mundo." (I am the master of the world.) Harry wiggled his eyebrows in the general direction of the Spaniard who snorted.

"Me agradas." (I like you). Luis smirked.

"Quitame a esta mujer de encima y el sentimiento sera mutuo." (Get this woman off me and I might return the sentiment.) Harry said wryly and Luis let out a laugh, startling Alice who looked back just in time to see strong arms swoop down and lift her off Harry. She swung her elbow backwards, intent on making his face a mushy picture but Luis dodged it easily and putting her down moved fluently back before she could try again.

Alice scowled and rounded on Harry instead, red eyes promising retribution. "You, where have you been?"

Harry brushed snow off himself, Lupa peering curiously out from behind his legs. "I take it you've stumbled upon the sudden disappearance of my family? It shouldn't much matter – they're not in the country anymore." He rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck.

"And I had to suffer because of it." She scowled at him. "I was forced from the Hospital to find you before I was allowed to return back." She folded her arms across her chest, glaring.

"You could have just left the jacket at home and lied." Harry said easily. "And living in the Hospital isn't healthy so they were only doing you a favor – as ridiculous as it turned out to be. Besides, so you seem to have found yourself a roommate so it wasn't that much of a task in the end, was it?" He raised an eyebrow at Alice who was staring at him with a peculiar look. "But I do appreciate it." He added and held out his hand expectantly.

Alice made no move to remove the jacket however. "I didn't bring my own." She said in way of explanation, eyes unreadable. "Come with me." She turned on the spot and began to march away in a brisk pace, heeled shoes carrying her elegantly and with ease.

"Es un poco peculiar, no es así? (She's a bit weird, isn't she?) Harry said dryly to the Spaniard.

"No tienes ni idea." (You have no idea.) Luis laughed, tugging the younger boy along.

Alice led them along to her apartment, Luis moving comfortably beside Harry who peered up at him after spending some minutes watching the tense back of Alice Creed.

"Entonces, como te llamas?" (So what's your name?) Harry asked the other man curiously.

"Luis Vega." The brunette said easily. "Y tú eres Harry Potter." (And you are Harry Potter.) He added after a moment.

"Sí." (Yes.) Harry inclined his head. "Disfrutando de su compañía?" (Enjoying her company?) He nodded his head in Alice's direction and was pleasantly surprised to see the softening of the man's expression.

"Mucho." (Very much.) Luis glanced down at him. "Ella me ha permitido en su casa. Un extranjero que no habla su idioma. Ella es muy amable." (She allowed me into her house. A stranger who does not talk her language. She is very kind.)

Harry tried not to look surprised but he must have failed for Luis let out a laugh beside him. "Ella fue mi enfermera cuando yo estaba en el hospital." (She was my nurse when I was in the Hospital.) Harry explained. "Ella no parece muy sociable." (She did not strike me as very people friendly.)

"She surprise, yes?" Luis said in broken English and they exchanged understanding grins.

They reached Alice's apartment and Luis moved fluently up beside Alice, plucking the keys from her fingers and unlocked the door. Alice merely rolled her eyes in annoyance and Harry followed them inside, both amused and bemused. Clearly this must have happened before, he concluded, and he would bet money on that the faded black eye had been left as a reminder.

Harry smirked at the thought of the violent woman and shook his head, hiding it as she peered suspiciously towards him. Her sixth sense is good, Harry thought grudgingly. But not nearly as good as mine. It wasn't as much as a sense as it was instinct. Knowing someone was looking at him, talking about him.

He raised an eyebrow as Luis and Alice exchanged glances and seemed to be holding a silent conversation right before his eyes. The hairs on his neck prickled and he blew air through his nose. Well what do you know... He cocked his head, pretended to regard the painting beside him, traced the fine threads with an absent finger.

For two people who don't even share the same language they seem to understand each other shockingly well. Such an amusing being this nurse has turned out to be.

"You."

"My name is Harry James Potter." He pointed out unnecessary as she turned fully towards him.

"Boya." She said and Harry had to smirk at her audacity. "I have been troubled because of you." She said this carefully, as if weighting her words. "I want to know just a bit of the truth. It is only fair, after all." She gave him a shrewd look, clearly expecting him to refuse and march out the door.

It was well in his right, Harry knew, but Alice had intrigued him from the moment he met her and his eyes wandered towards Luis who was watching him with a contemplative look. "There isn't much I can say." Harry admitted after a moment, placing two fingers at his temple and his thumb under his chin as he regarded them both, tapping his index finger against his head. "I can say that there are things that you do not know and would never contemplate the existence off and when I say the truth is dangerous I do mean so in the literal since." He tilted his head. "A murderer is out for my little brother and he's been put in safety, that's why they cannot be found."

"Your brother?" Alice narrowed her eyes at him. "Ten times more annoying than you, I take."

Was that a compliment of sorts? Harry's mouth twitched. "Yes, you would probably think so."

"And you are not in danger of this... murderer?" She didn't seem skeptical or worried, rather she appeared thoughtful – it looked alien on her face.

"Perhaps." He admitted. "I do look like Daniel but I am hardly of interest, not really."

Alice sat thoughtfully while Harry translated the words to Luis whose eyebrows hitched high. "¿Daniel es el hermano mayor o un hermano pequeño?" (Is Daniel your big brother or little brother?)

"Minor." (Little.) "¿Tienes algun hermano tambien?" (Are you a brother yourself?) Harry asked curiously.

"Si." Luis face saddened. "Pero ella fue asesinada." (But she was murdered.)

"Mis condolencias." (My condolences.) Harry said softly. "Tengo un hermano de sangre y uno adoptivo. Son dificiles de manejar." (I have one biological little brother and one adopted as well. They are a handful.)

Luis chuckled. "Me puedo imaginar." (I can imagine.) He glanced towards Alice who had begun muttering to herself as she rummaged through the books in the living room. "¿Crees que haya perdido la cordura?" (Do you think she has finally lost it?)

"Ella parece estar buscando algo." (She seems to be searching for something.) Harry dragged a hand through his hair with a wry smile. "Si eso es un signo de locura me temo que todo el mundo es una locura." (If that is a sign of insanity I'm afraid the whole world is insane.)

Luis laughed. "Lo esta, no se necesitan pruebas para saberlo." (It is. You don't need proof to know that.)

"Found it!" Alice sounded oddly triumphant, almost gleeful as she pulled a heavy tome from one of the dusty bookshelves and dropped it hard on the living room table. She stared straight into Harry's eye and proclaimed a word that almsot made his heart stop. "Magic."

She breathed the word as if it was the answer to everything. How the hell...?

"¿Qué te dijo?" (What did she say?)

"Magia." (Magic). Harry curled his mouth.

Luis gave him a contemplative look. ¿Acaso espera que saques un conejo de algun sombrero?" (Is she expecting you to pull a rabbit from a hat?) He tugged at the ends of Harry's black hair. "Siempre me he preguntado cómo se hace eso." (I have always wondered how that is done.)

"Me temo que no puedo hacer magia, solo trucos de cartas." (I'm afraid I cannot do magic, only card tricks.) Harry stared into the red eyes of Alice Creed. "Y de alguna manera no creo que eso es lo que quiere." (And somehow I don't think that's what she wants.) He said quietly.

"Es una lástima." (Too bad.) Harry gave the man a look and suspected the pouting lips was a sign of inner sulking on the Spaniard's part.

"Stop talking Spanish." Alice snapped impatiently and Harry dutifully returned his attention to her. "Magic – you are talking about the magical world, are you not?" She demanded impatiently.

"I am not allowed to tell." Harry curled his lips into a semblance of a smile as her eyes lightened in triumph. "How did you know?" He asked in interest as he leaned down to peer at the book. It was old and heavy and made his skin tingle. Magic, he had been around it his entire life.

"My aunt's father was magical, or so claimed to be. He was also insane but left this to my aunt who gave it to me knowing I collect various books of kind. I found strange letters describing strange things in it." Alice was now tracing the words of the book with a hungry look. "Can I learn?" She demanded.

"No, you cannot." She opened her mouth, clearly to snap at him but Harry was faster. "I cannot do it either."

"Why not?"

"Because you have to be born with it." He leaned back against the wall. "If you didn't get a letter when you were eleven you'll never get it." He said simply.

"A letter." She looked disbelieving now and Harry knew she was searching for a trace of hope, a loophole in what he was telling her.

"All magical children go to school and they are invited when they are eleven and ready to handle their growing powers. You are not magical and neither am I or Luis." He said this simply, clearly, and Alice shot him a foul look.

"That's unfair." He was surprised to hear the words from her, they sounded odd.

"Life is-

"Unfair, I know." She folded her arms across her chest, brushing away strands of short blond hair impatiently from her eyes. "A magical man is after your brother who looks almost exactly like you – I saw the pictures – and you being here... You're not putting me-" she glanced towards Luis who looked curiously back, "us," she corrected herself, "in any danger, are you?"

"For the record you are the one who invited me here." Harry said dryly. "But no, I could not sense anyone following me."

"You could not sense me tackling you." Alice said bluntly.

Harry's face flat lined. "Fair point." He conceded. "But you only wanted to pummel me, these people would kill me if they caught me."

"Or use you as a trade." Alice pointed out.

"A twin for a twin will hardly work." Harry shook his head. "No, death – or possible extraction of information that I do not have. I am a muggle – no magic – I am of no interest. I am considered weak in their eyes." Luis who was fiddling with his hair blew his ear.

"Harry malo." (Bad Harry.) The Spaniard said sternly.

"No entiendes lo que decimos." (You don't understand a word we're saying.) Harry pointed out dryly.

"Comprendí las palabras "weak" e "I"." (I understood the words "weak" and "I".) Luis protested.

"... Si tú lo dices." (...If you say so.) Harry rolled his eyes.

"I am not weak." Alice was scowling now. "Stuck up people – I hate them." Luis covered his ears as Alice began to curse and Harry glanced up at the man in amusement, gaining a smirk in response.

Harry ended up staying for lunch, Alice milking him for information while Luis cooked, shooting them curious glances from time to time and Alice had to pause to allow Harry to fill Luis in from time to time. The Spaniard seemed skeptical to the whole thing but listened with interest nonetheless and asked questions from time to time.

Luis placed a bowl on the floor for Lupa who yelped happily and dug in after a short word from Harry.

Alice remained silent as they ate, allowing Harry to watch her over the rim of his milk once he'd cleaned up his plate while she and Luis dug into a second plating. It wasn't smart, what he was doing – he knew. But she had known – with or without his denial and had he just turned and left after the question her thirst could have proven dangerous for she would have known.

Harry tilted his head. Now they both know, I hope they stick together – it will be safer for the both of them. Harry thought privately. I should have left the second I got here – I should have snatched my jacket back and march straight out. But this is nice... In an odd way. Sitting here in the kitchen with two people I'd hardly trust with my life and telling them all about a world they aren't supposed to know about...

I'm going insane, aren't I? Harry rolled his eyes heavenward.

Hardly child. Death's presence was like a soothing fragrance that wrapped around his senses and it took everything Harry had not to succumb to it. You are merely listening to your instincts that have taken a little push from my side. Harry imagined Death was smiling

and smiled back, directing it towards Lupa as to not appear suspicious.

So you've been interfering again?

Hardly. Death's ghostly fingers caressed his face. Merely hinting your path. Do not underestimate Ms Creed, she's an asset you do not want to lose. You are not the only one keeping secret in this kitchen.

Luis to? Harry thought curiously, glancing at the Spaniard who smiled at him.

Yes.

Hm. So how much am I expected to tell them?

It is your life child. Bony lips pressed against his forehead in an imitation of a kiss. No mankind is worthy of your complete trust, even the most loyal will falter.

Not I. Harry thought immediately. And I am of Man.

And I have told you so many times before how special you are. Death laughed. Just be careful but know you have my blessing. They are... good people.

What's with the hesitation? Harry raised a mental eyebrow.

...Even the purest heart of mankind is capable of murder given the right motivation...

Before Harry could question Death the presence was gone and Harry found himself staring into the expectant eyes of Alice Creed and Harry wondered what more lurked behind her red eyes.

"We are not allowed to know this, you said so." Harry nodded and Alice pursed her lips and the next words from her mouth startled him. "You will not... get it trouble?"

"No, they don't know I told you." Harry shook his head, quirked a tiny grin. "Glad to know you care though."

"I don't care." Alice scowled at him. "If you get into trouble we could get into trouble." She muttered. Harry's grin stretched wider and she scowled at him.

"Do you have an apple?" Harry glanced around for a fruit basket but found none and turned to Alice expectantly.

She jerked her thumb towards Luis. "Ask him. He knows the kitchen better than I do."

"¿Manzana?" Harry held out his hand expectantly. Luis twisted and reached back, opened the fridge and retreated with a lush green apple in his hand. Harry caught it happily and bit in with a satisfying crunch.

"... Disgusting." Alice shuddered. "Fucking apples."

Harry very nearly choked. "You don't like apples?" He asked in disbelief.

"I hate them." Alice said grimaced. Harry had never met anyone who shared his love for the fruit but to hate them?

It took everything he had not to gape. "Are you insane?" He gasped out, hugging his apple close.

Alice stared at him as if he'd just sprouted tits and hula-hula skirt. "Are you insane?" She snapped back. "It's just apples."

"Not just!" Harry slammed his hand down on the table. "It's the most wonderful fruit in the world!"

"I prefer pineapples." Alice said dismissively. "Apples just get stuck between your teeth and if you're hungry you only get even more hungry when you eat the things." She scowled.

"So?"

"So?"

Harry narrowed his eyes and turned towards Luis who had watched them in bemusement. "Odia las manzanas!" (She hates apples!)

"¿Y qué?" (So?) The Spaniard raised an eyebrow, looking bewildered. "No soy muy aficionado a ellos tampoco. Yo prefiero naranjas." (I'm not very fond of them either. I prefer oranges.)

Harry stared at the two of them, shaking his head in disbelief. "I can't believe you two." He muttered a few well chosen words about the strange world they lived in and gnawed little bits from his apple, intent savoring it for as long as possible. "Fucking hate apples... They must be insane." He shook his head.

Ace of Spades

Alice regarded the boy that had become a frequent (considering Luis was the first in years...) guest in her house. Guest. Alice wondered just when the hell she had opened up a hotell for insane people and invited them inside with open arms – for that is what I did, isn't it? Opened the door first for Luis Vega and then for Harry James Potter.

He looked thinner than he had in the Hospital and she knew that whatever he had done after his Hospital visit hadn't been very healthy. His tan had faded as well and the nurse inside her wanted to strap him down and hook him up on an IV.

I must be insane, Alice swiped such thoughts away impatiently. Nurse or not, people are nothing but annoying little beasts that should be nailed to crosses like Jesus and burned to death while I celebrate the silence in all its wonder. She had to smother a smile at the mental image which was rudely disturbed by her mentalself leaning her head against Luis Vega's breathing chest and Harry James Potter stretched out beside her all gooey smiles.

Fuck it! Alice scowled and muttered a curse beneath her breath.

"Thinking unhealthy thoughts, are you?" The boy had the nerve to glance at her in amusement.

"Shut up boya." She snapped, hating his smile and the easy laugh that sounded so foreign to her ears. How could it be that he was so relaxed around her – did he fake it, she wondered. Not all, she thought as she studied him. He doesn't trust me... other than not to kill him or maim him in any way.

She stared as the boy moved so silently she couldn't hear his steps and he crouched behind Luis Vega who was deep in his little English dictionary. A smirk which Alice shared and the boy launched himself towards the man, colliding hard with him and sending them both tumbling to the ground.

"¡Joder!" (Fuck!) The Spaniard tried to twist in the grip the boy had gotten over him but the boy twisted expertly and pressing his chest against the man's back he hooked his legs around Luis's waist and hooked his elbows under the man's armpits, pressing hard.

"¡Acepta que soy tu amo!." (Admit it, I am your Master!)

"¡Nunca!" (Never!) The boy smirked maliciously and bit down on the man's ear at the protest and Luis let out a string of Spanish curses that only the boy caught and rolled around, but still the boy remained hooked to his back as the Spaniard staggered to his feet.

Luis reached back, hooked his hand into the collar around the boy's neck and tugged but the leather was firm, the little metal plate with the sun clinked and the boy bit down harder in response. "¡Suelte pequeña sanguijuela!" (Let go you little leech!)

"¡Nunca!" The boy grinned gleefully and jerked his body sideways. The Spaniard stumbled Alice watched with glee as shins collided with the low table and with a curse the man tipped forward and the boy on his back let out a gleeful whoop as they swept down on floor level.

"Eres un minino malo." (You're evil, kitten.) Luis groaned against the floor.

They're not completely unbearable though. Alice laughed gleefully.

I was taught that the human brain was the crowning glory of evolution so far, but I think it's a very poor scheme for survival.

Evolution

"Mutation: it is the key to our evolution. It has enabled us to evolve from a single-celled organism into the dominant species on the planet. This process is slow and normally taking thousands and thousands of years. But every few hundred millennia, evolution leaps forward."

"John, why are we watching this again?" Harry asked, peering at the television screen with one eye, body sprawled out over the couch and arms folded beneath his head as John fiddled with something at the front. The sound careened upwards and Harry winced as Charles Xavier's voice reached a painful volume.

"Because it's cool!" John grinned, practically drooling as Hugh Jackman appeared on the screen. It was any teenage boy's dream to be a muscle packed man with steel and claws and even Harry made an appreciated hum, shifting as John sprawled at the other end of the couch. Harry was much taller than John and his feet reached the other's ears while John curled his beneath the crook of Harry's arm.

Snow fell outside in the darkness and John curled deeper into the couch, grinning from ear to ear as Cyclops and Storm appeared to save the day.

Harry would be lying if he said he didn't enjoy watching movies with John. His kind-of-adopted-brother had a way with expressions – just about gaping as Wolverine's claws popped forth, leaning forth at the intense movements and letting out a sigh of relief and sinking back as it was over. Harry perked up as Rebecca Romijn sassed onto the scene in all her blue scaled glory and Harry had to admire her smooth confident gait.

"Are you a God-fearing man, Senator? Such a strange phrase. I've always thought of God as a teacher; a bringer of light. You see, I think what you really fear is me. Me and my kind, the Brotherhood of Mutants. It's no surprise really. Mankind has always feared what it doesn't understand. Well, don't fear God, Senator, and certainly don't fear me. Not anymore."

Harry twitched a smile. Magneto was an impressive created character that had a way of smooth talking people that he imagined likened that of Voldemort – for whatever other reason would men and woman of the high society have to follow a man who made the bow and kneel, writing at his feet in pain, and still come back ever faithful to his side?

"We are the future, Charles, not them."

There was a sharp knock on the door, startling John from his X-Men induced haze. He looked up and eye flittering longingly to the screen . He made a move to rise but Harry was faster, already smoothly on his feet. "You keep watching." He told the surprised John and digging his hands into his pockets ambled into the hallway.

There was another knock and Harry rolled his eyes in exasperation, harshly tugged it open with a snappish answer on his tongue.

It was his annoyance that saved him. Body tense he lurched backwards, avoiding the blue light in a ninety degree angle that he used to his advantage. As the offender moved forward Harry allowed the movement to continue, bringing his right foot up sharply between the robed man's legs.

Harry's back slammed against the floor and he rolled to the side, pushed upwards into a crouch and curling his naked toes lunged at the man.

The man was caught off guard, apparently haven't expected resistance from a fifteen year old muggle, and the man slammed backwards, his head connecting loudly with a hollowly crack against the bureau with Harry's entire weight bringing the momentum. The man's wand dropped from his fingers and Harry snapped it up, digging it into his backpocket seconds before quick feet alerted him and he spun around, intercepting John before the boy could get a good look at the situation.

"Harry?" John's voice was a strangled whimper and Harry tightened his grip, leading the boy away from the man and the rapidly forming pool of blood on the floor.

"Hush," he gently soothed, "stay here, I'll take care of it." Boneless John sunk down on the couch Harry had directed him to and nodded, dazed.

Harry returned to the hallway, drawing his knife and clenching it in his hand as he crouched down before the masked Death Eater and pried the intricate metallic mask of his face after flickering down the hood. The face wasn't one he recognized and Harry supposed that Voldemort, as the man, hadn't expected much fight from a defenseless muggle boy and had sent one of his lesser known, perhaps a new recruit as a kind of test.

The man was in his mid thirties, handsome in an average kind of way with short brown tresses and dark stubble. His eyes were closed. Harry leaned forward, shifting the man's head to peer at the deep gorge of crushed bone with slippery slick blood and brain substance. Harry pressed two fingers against the man's throat and wasn't surprised to find no sign of a pulse.

He straightened and wiped sweaty trembling fingers on his pants.

Death, I know you're here – what's going on? Harry glanced around, half expecting Death to appear by his side but there was no response and he clenched his fingers in fury. Death! Still no response and Harry raked his fingers through his hair, staring down at the dead Death Eater. DEATH!

"Nothing. It's not supposed to be nothing." Harry muttered to himself, worried both for himself and for Death and for John. He crouched down on the floor, staring hard into the dead man's eyelids slowly a mad grin stretched his lips. "Light bulb." He whispered and his green eyes glittered.

Curled up on the couch with his hands pressed over his John he tried to block out the sounds from the hallway as Harry struggled to get the man into a large garbage bag, tying it up and heaving the man over his shoulder after cleaning up the blood and leaving the house. He didn't know how much time passed but the movie had reached the end of the credits and the main menu was back on, playing the soundtrack over and over again and John tried to focus on the sound and ignore all else. He was getting so deep into the music that he startled and lurched backwards as a hand settled on his shoulder and his blue eyes flickered up to meet the sad green

eyes of his brother. John regretted the move immediately and reached out for his brother who obediently settled his arms around John as he buried his face into his warm chest and inhaled the scent of smoke.

It didn't take a genius to know what Harry had done with the body and he shivered, pressing himself ever closer to Harry. "Who was he?" He dared to ask, because he wanted to know – needed to know who was trying to kill his brother. Had Harry made more enemies when he'd been gone that month? Offended some crime boss or –

But his speculations were quickly put to a rest and the alarm turned into an odd sort of numb horror. "Do you remember when I told you about Tom Marvolo Riddle?" Harry's voice was gentle, soothing, but John could feel the building panic inside of him and the raving voice in his head would not settle.

Tom Marvolo Riddle, the man who had nearly killed Harry and his brother Daniel when they were just tiny children. A mad man, evil and dark and – "I remember." John said weakly, and he wished that he didn't. He glanced towards the hallway where the man had entered and felt a fool's hope rise inside him. "Then that man, was that-"

"No." Harry interrupted and John deflated, clenching Harry's shirt harder in his hands. He was trembling and John hated it. "He was low rank, probably new at that and he knew little of what he was doing. Tom – he's got red eyes and black hair, I think, and he's pale – almost chalky pale and tall and," Harry hesitated, "he calls himself Lord Voldemort."

"Lord Voldemort?" John repeated, caught off guard. "He really calls himself that?"

Harry nodded. "And his followers, we call them Death Eaters. They're always robe clad with metallic masks and tattooed on their inner left wrists are a skull with a snake curling out of its gaping mouth. They call Voldemort the Dark Lord."

"They sound like a cult," John shivered.

Harry's mouth twisted oddly. "Yeah, they do – don't they."

John's eyebrows creased. "But I thought – you said he was dead, right. How come he's alive now – and why is he trying to," John swallowed, "kill you," he choked on the words, "after fourteen years?"

Harry sighed heavily. "Who knows how the mind of a madman works? He's insane, obviously, and he's out for revenge. The interference that resulted in his apparent death put a stopper too years of perfectly laid plans and he wants Daniel dead. I'm just an opportunity to hurt Daniel, nothing more."

John's insides churned. That's what Harry was? An opportunity to hurt his brother? John stared up into the sincere kind eyes of his brother, walls chipped away and gaze softened. Strong and tall with his messy black hair that girls chatted about running their fingers through, a lean body wired with muscles, steady legs and long smooth dexterous fingers that John had heard his fair speculations about.

Famous cool Harry James Potter, aloof yet so loved. Brilliant at sports, a leader – standing up for those who he deemed needed it. The boy who had nearly died twice to save his life. The Harry that was a sucker for Romantic Comedies but who tried to hide it. The same Harry who had found Rosy Rose and –

The idea that Harry was nothing but an opportunity filled him with an icy fury that John had difficult to contain it. "You are not just an opportunity," John said. Harry blinked at him and had the situation been anything but what it was John would've been gloating over the open surprise in Harry's eyes.

Green eyes softened. "You're a good kid, John." Harry tapped John's forehead twice in a peculiar habit of his and he was smiling wide enough to show white straight teeth. "Thank you."

Ace of Spades

Lily looked up as the door opened a smile forming on her lips but it froze and she dropped the glass she'd been holding with a strangled horrified gasp. It shattered against the kitchen floor and tiny splits of glasses spread everywhere but Lily didn't have an eye for it.

Harry has thrown his black jacket to the side and the clothes beneath it were stained heavily with blood. He looked haggard and torn and his eyes that had been distant, almost lost, as he entered the house flickered up at the sound of the glass breaking, meeting hers.

"Harry-," Lily breathed the name of her oldest son, quickly crossing the distance between them and sweeping him into a strong hug. She was surprised when he didn't pull away or tense, instead he seemed to sag against her and Lily's worry grew as she gently led him into the living room where James and Sirius were boisterously talking to each other.

"Lily-flower?" James glanced up. "Everything al-," James jumped to his feet and Sirius glanced up in surprise, face growing pale at the sight of his godson. Lily gently pushed Harry down in one of the chairs and he complied, although reluctantly.

"Harry," James' voice penetrated the blankness of Harry's mind and he looked up at his father who stared down at him with worried brown eyes. "What happened Harry?"

The answer was far from what they'd been expecting. "A Death Eater tried to kill me at John's house." Harry said heavily and the adults exchanged horrified looks.

"Are you alright – did he get you anywhere?" Sirius asked seriously, grey eyes raking Harry's form in search for the slightest sign of a wound.

But Harry shook his head. "No, Alastor's lessons brought something good," he quirked a weak grin. "I don't think he expected a muggle to be able to catch him off guard. He was obviously low rank," he added, already anticipating the following question, "none I have ever seen. I took his picture with my phone – here," Harry dug through his pocket and pulled up a relatively new model of a mobile phone and showed them the picture of the man.

The fact that the man was dead didn't go unnoticed by any of them as they studied the man. "You are right," James said after a moment. "Newly ranked, obviously, and he doesn't work in the Ministry for we would have known him." His eyes narrowed at the picture of the Death Eater and James felt grimly satisfied by the man's death. The

next picture confirmed his allegiance with the Dark Lord, the black tattoo on his inner left wrist.

"Is John alright?" Sirius asked after a moment.

Harry closed his eyes stroked his eyes tiredly with his right palm "Yes – yes, I was the one who answered the door." Harry looked up, meeting the understanding eyes of his godfather. "Had he answered he would've been dead. I'm putting both John and Jessica in danger but leaving would be a fool's choice, it would leave them without protection when I'm the one who got them into this mess in the first place." Harry sighed. "I'm not just sure what to do. I told John about Voldemort and gave both description of him and his followers and told him to hide if there was suspicious activity but that was all I could really do for tonight."

"Harry," Harry looked up at James who was looking distinctively uncomfortable, "what did you do with the corpse?" James asked hesitantly.

"I burnt it." Harry answered grimly. "And I buried the bones as good as I could."

James sat down heavily in the opposite chair, feeling like he was both hearing and seeing his son for the first time in his life. Harry looked so... mature sitting there. Not a word of concern for his own welfare, it was just John and his mother, the same woman who had tricked John into believing Harry was dead and who had told them the same lie when they came knocking on her door despite the papers speaking differently. His eyes were shadowed and his hands held a tremor he was trying to hide by clenching his thighs in a white knuckled grip and his body was rigid with tension.

James had never seen him so shaken, not since Harry was little.

James knew he should be confronting Harry about the killing but he had only paved the bridge half way between them and knew Harry wasn't going to confide in him and it would be foolish to press him to. Harry was just too independent by now, he had grown up too fast.

"You did good, son." James said quietly and Harry's eyes flickered with surprise. "Go to bed, we will consider the options." He hesitated

but reached out, mussing up Harry's black hair even further. "You just rest; we will do what we can to make sure they are safe."

"Thank you." Harry's voice was hoarse with emotions that didn't show in his face and James smile was sad as father and son shared a moment of understanding.

Ace of Spades

"Am I supposed to be amused?" Jessica said in a chilling voice. "I do not like that boy telling you lies, there are no one out to kill him. You are not in any danger." She said the words slowly, overly clearly – as if she was speaking to a child. John clenched his fists and tried hard not to glare at her.

His mom had changed. Deep dark circles beneath her eyes, an ever cynical voice and eyes that shut out the world and refused to accept fact. John didn't know what to do about it, he felt pathetically helpless.

Was he really incapable of helping anyone? It was as if he didn't count, as if Anthony had meant so much more despite what he had done and now that it was just John left he suddenly didn't count... He just wasn't enough.

It hurt and John hated that she made him feel like that.

"He's not lying." He mirrored her patronizing tone, unconsciously baring his teeth in the way that Harry did when he got mad or was very close to snapping. "There was a man in here – he tried to hurt Harry."

Jessica raised a mocking eyebrow. "Was there now? And what - did he have a gun?" Her mouth curled unpleasantly in a smirk.

John opened his mouth to respond and even as his mind came to the conclusion that he had certainly not seen a weapon and he rolled out the response with all the certainty and belief of a loving little brother. "Of course he had a weapon – how else do you think he attacked Harry?"

"I didn't see a mark on that boy." Jessica frowned. "I will not believe it."

"Of course you won't!" John snarled. "You won't believe anything these days! You're so fucking stuck in your own world that you're drifting around, making your own opinions and putting all your faith in them because you refuse to meet reality!" John wasn't even aware of that he was screaming or that his mom's face was rapidly paling to a shallow unhealthy color. "ANTHONY WAS GOING TO KILL ME!" He roared, body trembling with anger. "If it weren't for Harry I'd be dead! AND YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE THE DECENCY TO SAY THANK YOU OR EVEN LOOK AT HIM!"

"John, son-"

"Don't even try!" John snapped, too angry to care, too angry to see the tears spilling down his mom's face as he swirled around and stomped up the stairs. He wiped at his face furiously, trying to rid of the tears but his heart was pounding and it hurt. He couldn't breathe; he could feel his chest constricting and his eyes screwed up. He took deep breathes. The nerves in his body were on fire and his muscles clenched, ready for an attack.

A hand settled slowly, hesitantly on his shoulder and his body tensed even further. "You loved Anthony more than you ever loved me, didn't you?" He asked hopelessly, his voice ragged and broken.

She didn't answer and John wrenched out of her grip and slammed the door to his bedroom shut behind him. Feeling as if Harry was the only person he could trust in the entire world and wanting nothing more than to bury his face into his brother's chest in cry John collapsed on the bed and buried his face in his pillow, Harry anxiously curling up at his feet as he tried fruitlessly to smother his sobs.

Ace of Spades

"Good morning Ms Umbridge!" Daniel greeted happily as he walked into the Defence Against the Dark Arts lessons fifteen minutes late. Hermione and Ron who were already in place rolled their eyes in unison while the rest of the class stared at him in blatant disbelief.

"You're late." Umbridge said stiffly, staring at him as if she expected him to turn into a pink balloon any second, her toad like eyes narrowed.

"That I am." Daniel agreed happily. "And it would make me no happier than to come to one of your detentions," by now his classmates were gaping at him, "but alas, there was a matter of family matter and I have a note from Professor Dumbledore." He waved a blue note between index and middle finger before her as he came to a halt before her desk and she snatched it from his grip, face blotchy red.

"Go to your seat Mr Potter." Umbridge snapped furiously.

"As you wish Ms Umbridge." Daniel bobbed his head happily, Ron and Hermione already making way for him and he plopped down between them. "Sunny is back." He said happily, looking about ready to skip down the sunset road of clichés.

"We know." Both friends groaned. "You've already said so fifty-two times."

"Don't get us wrong, we're happy for you." Hermione said carefully as Daniel blinked at her, hurt. "But there is only so many times we like to hear it repeated."

"Yeah mate," Ron whispered as to avoid Umbridge's attention, "Hermione is right. We're happy – we really are and it was nice to see you skip around in gleam instead of sluggishly dragging yourself around like a gigantic cloud of doom this morning." He ignored Daniel's shocked expression. "And we like Sunny – he's your brother and all and he's kind of been helping us out a bit so its nice knowing he's safe."

Hermione nodded in agreement. "I suppose you'll be seeing him in three weeks during the winter holidays." She diverted as Daniel opened his mouth again. He shut it with a click, eyes lightening.

"Yeah," Daniel sighed, "I tried to convince mom to let me see him earlier but she said it was better to wait."

He's gotten the short response consisting of the words "I'm back" last night and had immediately written to his parents to beg them to take him home but had gotten the refusal during morning. Something about Sunny needing to patch things up and rest and...

They made it sound as if he was hurt but they had assured them that it wasn't the case, that Sunny was just tired.

Daniel sighed but was soon lightening up again. Three weeks. He hummed to himself. He could deal with three weeks – he could make it work, he would make it work. Already he was counting down the days. And Daniel already knew that the moment he saw Sunny he was going to tackle his brother, crowd or no crowd, and he was going to tell Sunny just how much he meant to him and that he was so very happy that his twin was safe.

He closed his eyes and conjured a picture of his brother in his mind, smiling. I'm so glad you're safe Sunny. He thought, ignoring the still shocked looks that lingered on him and the flustered Dolores Umbridge who couldn't quite get the lesson up and going due to shock. I can't wait until we see each other again.

Ace of Spades

What did one mean with death, Angelina wondered. Seated in her history class the young witch watched the ghostly teacher drone on without really hearing or seeing him. Her classmates had taken to leave a berth around her as if she was a disease. Nervousness ruled them... a lack of understanding and knowledge of how to treat her. I feel like a new exotic animal that no one wants to touch... She sighed and her mind wandered to Blackbird.

Death. The obvious conclusion was that he was a murdered, a killer taking pride in what he'd done. But from the meeting she had pried out of Katie he hadn't seemed like a psychopath. But then again he could have been a very good actor... Again, doubtful, for why would he take the time to listen to her when he knew very well that they would never meet? There was no amusement or satisfaction to be gained from her snappish letters.

Unless he was a sick person who got off on rape cases, Angelina thought with a snort – ignoring the way the word made her heart burn and stomach twist. Again, there was no way of knowing. Perhaps he was just the kind of person that liked helping others. You thought the same about Tobias, a voice whispered in her ear and it took everything she had not to slap her hand over her mouth as she swallowed back the bile that rose at his name.

"You need to trust someone!" Angeline recalled Katie's word, her tear-filled eyes as she fought her sobs back. "You can't keep going on like this Ang, you just can't! I want my friend back!"

Angelina closed her eyes, breathing in deeply through her nose.

"I want my friend back!"

How much had she changed, really? She felt like a trapped animal inside the castle walls that once had only brought her comfort. The humiliation, fear and desperation – the emotions seemed to radiate from the old Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom and she didn't even dare to venture close. It was a foolish fear... but Angelina couldn't for the life rationalize with her mind that he was gone.

Or is he?

She hadn't seen him leave... And that terrified her on a level that wasn't rational.

The parchment meant to take notes on lay bare before her and she became aware of the quill in her hand. Take a chance? Did she dare, did she really? The instant response was no, she would not – could not put her faith in a man, not again. She had done so and she had lost and she had suffered badly for it.

"I woke him up from his nap in a car – he reminded me of Daniel, a case of mistaken identity and soon I was asking him out to a date."

This... Blackbird had been approached, not the other way around. He was miles away, a muggle who had no involvement in the magical world... There would never be anything more than letters, she would remain anonymous to him and if worse came to worse she could just over power him with magic and charm his memories away.

She ignored the pang of guilt and ill feeling the thought brought as she brought her pen to the paper and hesitantly began to scrawl out her response.

Blackbird,

I wonder if you wrote Death to scare me away. Or perhaps you're just a psychopath intent on stalking your new victim and you like laying out bizarre warnings to test me, but if that is the case I'm afraid that the chances of you finding me is next to zero and you'll find yourself stuck with only letters.

She paused before continuing.

I had a confrontation with our contact some days ago. The words she told me? "I want my friend back." She is the main reason I'm writing this letter... But I admit that perhaps I need to speak it out with someone and you're as good as any. I have changed... I wonder how much.

Her hand trembled as she wrote the last words.

How do I go back to being whole again? Please, I need to know.

Eclipse

Hedwig was waiting for her in the owlery as Angeline dodged away from the crowd leading towards the Great Hall, beautiful with her white feathers and intelligent amber eyes. Katie had jokingly said that the owl reminded her of her new owner and it gave Angelina a semblance of hope.

Hedwig fluttered over to settle on her shoulder and she stuck her leg out expectantly. "You want me to send this... Don't you girl?" Angelina said softly and Hedwig gave a bark of agreement, nudging her feathered head against Angelina's dark skin. She cursed the tremble of her hand as she tied it to the snowy owl's leg and Hedwig gave her ear an affectionate nip before jumping over to the offered hand.

Angelina leaned out the window, Hedwig balanced on her wrist. I need this. "Make sure he gets it."

Hedwig hooted, looking affronted that anything else should have been expected, and launched herself off her makeshift perch and swooping downwards before mighty flaps of her wings brought her soaring into the sky, melting away from Angelina's sight as she swept into the clouds.

No one is in control of your happiness but you; therefore, you have the power to change anything about yourself or your life that you want to change.

Expectations

Visionary images of glaring blue eyes haunted Harry's sleep. Eyes that went from glaring to fearful and blood covered hands and crackled skulls made him twist, his body covered in sweat and his hands clenching the covers spasmodically.

He woke up three am and unable to fall back to sleep he pulled on some jogging pants and a hoodie and snuck outside for a round in the cold misty night air. The rhythmic pattern of his sneakers hitting the pavement was soothing to his stressed mind and he found himself gradually relaxing.

Resolutely he pushed all thoughts of the dream out of his mind and by the time he returned he was exhausted, legs quivering with lactic acid and he was asleep within moments of reaching his bed.

The next day Harry found himself oddly expectant as he scanned the crowd twenty minutes after stepping through the fake brick wall that guarded the entrance to the train platform that welcomed the steaming red and black Hogwarts train and its cargo. Families and relatives were milling around him.

He had placed himself as strategically as possible and chances were that Daniel would catch sight of him first. Or so he hoped. It had taken some convincing on his part to get his parents and whatever order members milling around to allow him to pick his brother up. Heavy arguing, really, but he had won (how still eluded him but he put it down heavily to his parents who had been acting favorably lately) and now he was standing there, cradling his helmet under his right arm.

Despite preparations he still found it dropping to the floor and his breath was torn from him as a body that was only slightly lighter than his own colliding into him. Arms encircled him and their bodies were pressed flush. Harry pulled Daniel close, drawing strength from the contact between them. How could it be that he had missed the other boy so much when he was hard claimed to trust him not six months ago?

Daniel was only vaguely aware of Hermione, Ron, Neville and Ginny moving towards them in the background, too absorbed in hearing Harry's beating heart and feeling the warm flush of a body that was very much alive and not dead in some ditch as he had imagined it to be in the throes of nightmares.

Harry released him and stepped back, eyes raking over him and Daniel returned the favor, noting the dark rings and pale skin and felt worry gnawing at the back of his mind. It was easily pushed back by the relief, however, to be considered later.

"Sunny." It felt wonderful to roll the name and see the green eyes of his brother shift with warmth. "How come you are here?" He asked breathlessly, wanting to ask so much but knowing it was neither the time nor place and that it would have to wait until they were home.

"I'm here to pick you up." Daniel's eyes widened with surprise.

"Seriously?"

"Very much so." The corner of Harry's mouth twitched into a wry grin. "I think mom and dad heavily favored some brother-brother time and nothing would convince them otherwise once I laid out the preposition."

"You absolute bastard." Harry stumbled backwards as Hermione collided with him in a whirlwind of bushy hair and a flash of furious deep brown eyes before they were hidden in his shirt as she hugged him tightly. Harry suspected she wanted to pummel him but was refraining from doing so by clutching his shirt tightly, knuckles white as she trembled. "You have so much to answer to." She told him in a low warning tone. "You fairly drove Daniel insane with worry!" She growled darkly in his ear, too quiet for anyone but him to catch before retracting from his grip to allow Ron to take her place.

Ron laid a hand on his shoulder with a serious look. "Whatever she said, I'm in total agreement."

"I suspect that I in all fairness deserve it." Harry inclined his head cordially before turning to Ginny and Neville with a polite smile. "Pleasure to see you all, I am sure, but little Tripper here and I need to get a move on. I trust you still have your helmet?" He directed this

to Daniel who had been fiddling with his trunk and was pulling forth a miniscule model of a helmet in triumph.

"Yeah, I just have to ask Mr Weasley to unshrink it." He said somewhat sheepishly. "And get my trunk shrunken instead I suppose..." He strolled off, leaving Harry with his troop of friends.

Harry entertained the thought of starting a conversation with Hermione but suspected that his parents wouldn't be too happy with him if he came back with a recipe for the cost of a new platform when he had been entrusted with the responsibility of being "adult-like" as Siri had so wonderfully put it. Instead began counting the many ways he could greet someone. It had become something of a hobby after Alice had mentioned in passé about knowing little phrases in several different languages.

He had just settled for greetings and a swear to be able to switch between being polite and impolite. The Swedish greeting is "hejsan" and the Swedish swear for the day is "fan". The Mandarin greeting is "ni hao" and the Mandarin swear is-

"Ni hao Aes." Luna's dreamy voice was followed by a soft body pressing up against his back and her arms enveloping his chest to fiddle with one of the cords from his hood surprised him into lettings out an odd choking noise of surprise as he froze in her grip. She giggled softly, nuzzling her cheek against his spine. "I surprised you." She pointed out as Harry breathed out through his nose.

"That you did." Harry agreed, twisting his body just enough to peer down at her silvery grey eyes over his shoulder. "I must thank you for your drawings. I've nailed them to my wall at home. They're quite lovely." He told her quietly with a sincere smile.

"I am glad." She told him, nuzzling his back.

"Luna?" Ginny was staring at the two of them in surprise. "You two friends?" She asked, looking like she quite couldn't understand this sudden development.

"We are." Harry answered, Luna peering out at Ginny from behind his back. "She gave me some advice this summer and we have," he turned a thoughtful look to Luna, "kept in contact through the year."

"How come you never mentioned this to me?" Ginny demanded from her best friend curiously. Luna merely shrugged, tightening her hold on Harry.

Daniel returned with the rest of the Weasley family in tow and people were saying goodbye, promising to keep in contact and meet during the break. Mr Weasley shook Harry's hand and Mrs Weasley, though dubious about the bike, didn't voice it and merely embraced him with a stern glance and made him promise to join in on the making of the Christmas dinner which he did all too happily.

"You will invite me for Christmas, Aes." Luna said quietly in his hear. "I expect the perfect present." She stood on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his cheek before she vanished off in the crowd before Harry could answer. Bemused he tilted his head and smiled softly in the direction he'd seen her disappear.

"Are you ready?" Daniel asked, appearing beside him.

"I believe I'm the one to ask that." Harry said dryly, clasping his twin's shoulder. "You got everything?" Daniel nodded, patting his pockets and they slid through the passage onto the muggle platforms. The people around them were loud and they were moving quickly in thick packs. Harry grabbed hold of Daniel's upper arm and tilted his head in the direction of the bike, tugging Daniel with him.

It was a relief to get into the fresh air and Harry released Daniel's arm. "It's getting crazier each year." Daniel groaned, copying Harry by putting on his helmet. The bike was looking surprisingly nice in a roughed up but well cared kind of way and it rumbled to life under Harry's expertise.

Daniel awkwardly straddled the bike behind his brother and Harry had to tug at his arm to remind him to wrap them around his waist. Riding the bike the first time had been a terrifying thrill, the second time was pure enjoyment. Daniel whooped as Harry heightened the speed and they skidded around a corner, knees dipping low near the concrete. Daniel's breath caught and he laughed. It was so unlike flying. The wind whipping against his face through the open visor was almost as wonderful as whipping through the year on his broom and the skidding tires brought a whole other thrill to danger.

Harry drove the kind of recklessness abandonment that Daniel flew and the recognition made it impossible for him to be afraid as the bike roared and cars honked.

Harry noticeably slowed down as they closed in on the Potter manor and they disappeared through the wards, following the winding dirt road up to the house where Harry came to a smooth halt. Daniel awkwardly extracted himself, jumping on one foot to turn his body to keep from tumbling ungracefully to the ground. He was beaming wildly, though, and his eyes were shining.

"You got to take me on a ride through the woods sometime." Daniel said breathlessly. "That was fucking awesome."

Harry smirked. "Only if you take me on a ride on your broom."

Daniel lightened up at the prospect. "Deal!" He clasped Harry's shoulder and his face turned serious. "Talk tonight?" He asked silently as the door opened behind him.

"Your room." Harry said, inclining his head. Seconds later Daniel was firmly enveloped by Lily followed by James, Remus and Sirius who was welcoming him back. A cake had been made and decorated by Harry and James who were the only ones in the family with even a touch of artistic ability. That said, it was hardly a work of art but it wasn't a total catastrophe either and they were both fairly proud over it.

Daniel could only laugh at the snidget with blue and pink dotted underwear reading DANIEL with painfully neat letters and the WELCOME BACK on the plaque hanging down from the branch which it was residing on which had obviously been given up on halfway and the end was haplessly written in blue frosting.

"It's cute." Daniel grinned at the two makers and was satisfied to see his dad splutter at the term while Harry arched an amused eyebrow.

"It's manly." James pouted, crossing his arms across his chest.

"We designed it after his favorite underwear," Harry stage whispered, dodging a playful grab from his dad and with a crouching roll that made Lily's eyes widen in horror as he vanished beneath the table

to appear on his feet at the other side, miraculously not hitting the table which his mom had dived to save.

"Don't do that!" Lily spluttered, eyes wide as she cradled the cake, half expecting him to do a repeat performance. Harry smirked but straightened in clear indication that the cake was safe from him but her husband and his best friend were eying her with a thoughtful look that made her mouth curl. "One move and I'll fry you." She warned, brandishing her wand.

They were clever enough to heed the warning.

The adults had bought welcome home presents of kind, only Harry was getting some as well so it wasn't really accurate. Harry had despite his mom's urging not gotten Daniel a present, already quite content with his Christmas present and unwilling to go out searching for another one. It had taken enough time of his life as it were.

It had become something of a tradition in the Potter family since Daniel's return after his first year and Harry and Daniel both tore the wrappers of the presents from their parents.

Harry grinned at the classic black and white football he'd torn the wrapper off and carefully tested the pressure under Daniel's curious eyes. "What is it?" Daniel reached out to touch it, mildly surprised by the leathery feel so unlike the quaffle he was used to catching and throwing. "I've seen these before – you kick it, don't you?"

"It's a football." Harry rolled the ball from right hand over his shoulders to his left and spun it in his hand with a self-satisfied smirk. "It's for a game called soccer. Basically there are two teams consisting of eleven players. The game is played on a rectangular field of grass with a goal in the middle of each of the short ends. The object of the game is to score by driving the ball into the opposing goal. In general play only the goalkeepers are allowed to touch the ball while field players typically use their feet to kick the ball into position, occasionally using their head and torso to intercept the ball in midair." Harry explained. "Its popularity in the muggle world could be compared to that of Quidditch in the wizard world and millions of muggles gather together to cheer for their teams during championships each year."

"And you play it?" Daniel asked, trying to imagine what the game might look like. He had seen children play something like what Harry described but it had paid it little head and regretted it now.

"Yes." Harry tossed the ball to Daniel who caught it easily. "I play various positions but I'm normally placed to play either attacking midfielder or striker."

"Are you any good?" Daniel asked as he threw the ball back.

"Better than you can ever dream to be." Harry said with a smirk.

When it was Daniel's turn he lightened up at the sight of a golden snitch. Its carefully crafted wings folded out smoothly as he touched it and it rose to hover before him, fluttering almost playfully before him and darting just out of reach as Daniel made a move to catch it. The teenage boy narrowed his eyes and crouching made a playful dive for it in a near perfect imitation of the dive Harry had performed moments before and Lily let out a squawk of protest that made her husband chuckle.

Daniel missed and he pouted, folding his arms across his chest and glared at the happily zooming ball of gold. The snitch looped playfully through the air, dancing just out of his reach in mocking little circles until Harry's hand darted out to catch it in midflight.

Daniel blinked in mild surprise as the golden ball was presented for his view. "I'll never be a good seeker." Daniel sighed as he carefully took the small ball from his twin's grip. "I'm a chaser through and through." He peered up at Harry thoughtfully. "You might have made a decent one though."

From Sirius Daniel received a box with pranking items that he frantically prevented Daniel from opening in front of Lily who was looking both suspicious and resigned at the same time.

Harry on the other hand had received a small box that he pried open. Two simple platinum earrings lay inside and Harry tipped them gently into his palm, rolling them curiously as he studied them. There was nothing particularly special with them other than the carefully written black scripts in Latin that decorated each.

Parvus

Mágnus

Harry's understanding of Latin was rough but he was fairly sure Parvus translated into "little" and Mágnus into "large" or something of the like.

Harry raised an eyebrow in his godfather's direction and the man shrugged, gesturing that he would explain later. Harry pocketed the rings as Daniel tugged him up and demanded to get going on the cake.

It was late night when Daniel and Harry fell in bed in their respective rooms; the later hard pressed to contain his smile and the other not even trying.

Daniel couldn't remember the last time their family had felt so... whole. It was a startling feeling that filled him to the brim with warmth. It was euphoria of the simplest kind, contentment crawling lazily through his veins to settle somewhere deep in his chest.

There was a war going down outside hidden doors but as he lay in his bed, awaiting Harry so that they could finally talk, Daniel couldn't for the life of him find it in him to care.

Harry on the other hand was finding his thoughts glued to the earrings in his hand with a whole new appreciation for his godfather.

Sirius folded one leg over the other and leaned back in chair as he studied the blank look on his godson's face. He wondered mildly if he had actually managed to shock the boy – that could be the case, yes. I hope I did – a nice faint and blackmail forever, he thought with a smirk he had to smother ruthlessly as soon as it appeared.

"Are you serious?" Harry looked up and there was an odd look in his deep green eyes.

"Yes, I am Sirius." His joke fell on unappreciated ears and he suppressed a pout. "It wasn't easy to charm them – I had to ask Remus for help. The text was his idea so that you would be able to tell them apart, big and small. Parvus warns Mágnus, easy – yes?"

"And you're sure they work?" Harry asked carefully, not wanting to offend his godfather but wanting to be sure nevertheless.

Sirius hummed. "Put on the Parvus." He said, already hooking Mágnus into his own ear. Harry did as told and though tensing as Sirius leveled the wand at him remained still as magic washed over him. It was one of the very few spells without documented ill effect on muggles, a simple diagnostic spell.

Harry's hand touched the ring in Sirius ear and found it almost icy to touch. "And when he's feeling panicked it'll grow warm?" Harry asked as he carefully inspected the Magnus ear dropped into his hand and after a moment clicked it in place. An odd feeling washed over him and there was this little new... awareness in the back of his mind monitoring the new addition to his body.

"Yes." Sirius nodded. "It'll react to his elevated pulse and whatever little endorphins and adrenalin and such panic causes the body to experience. Moony can explain it better but that is the basic gist of the whole thing." Sirius smiled at his godson. "You said you wanted to keep him safe, this way you'll know if he's in danger."

"Thank you." Harry curled his hand into a fist, hiding Parvus from sight. "It..." Harry looked up, meeting the grey eyes of his godfather. "It means a lot... to me... so thank you." He said softly.

"Just drop of the same message to Moony and I'm good." Sirius reached out to ruffle his hair. "I know something happened between you, he's kind of been avoiding you. Be a good kid and fix things up?"

"I'm the kid and you expect me to make things right?" Harry grumbled, peering up at Sirius with one eye.

"I think you're old enough to take responsibility, Harry." Sirius said with a stern look before leaving the room.

Harry rubbed his face and dragged a hand through his hair. "Apparently I should just skip being truthful altogether, really..."

Harry waited an hour before he carefully cracked the door open, clad in yellow sweats as he silently crept down the corridor on naked

feet. Daniel was awake and he startled, quickly closing the book he'd been reading and putting it away hurriedly.

The room was painted in an intense blue color and had much the same functional furniture as himself only instead of the muggle knickknacks and the occasional magical item Daniel's room was made up almost entirely of magical stuff haphazardly unpacked from his trunk and settled precariously on edges.

Daniel's Firebolt had been placed next to his old Nimbus 2000 and was in pristine condition. His new quaffle had been settled on a half-empty bookshelf and the book he had been reading was Notes from Underground.

"Are you enjoying it?" Harry asked silently, settling down at the foot of the bed.

"Yes." Daniel smiled weakly. "I couldn't for the life of me understand why you sent it in the first time but now I'm practically obsessed. I keep finding new things to compare with and it's given me a whole new way of looking at things as well as keeping me away from Umbridge." He peered closely at Harry. "I suppose that was your aim." He added after a moment.

Harry cocked his head to the side. "How you chose to see things are a matter of opinion. I will neither deny nor agree with that statement." He smirked and Daniel groaned.

"Yeah, yeah – a simple no comment would have been enough you know." Daniel grumbled but nevertheless he was grinning.

They sat in silent, studying each other – taking in the changes, from the small differences of a half year apart and the age old differences that separated them from their youngerselves. "Sunny... can you answer me something truthfully?"

Harry licked the upper row of his teeth in a peculiar thoughtful habit their mom had complained about already at early age but which he had never managed to rid himself off. "Depends." He met Daniel's topaz like eyes head-on with a serious look. "I will try, that's as much as I'm willing to promise."

"I..." Daniel leaned back against the wall of his bed. "When you... disappeared," he lowered his eyes to his lap, "did you think of me at all? I mean – you must have known I would be worried, I think I made that clear in the letters that we exchanged and I was so sure, so freaking sure that you were dead because I assumed that you would contact me if that wasn't the case." He looked up, meeting Harry's green eyes with too many emotions swimming in his own. "I was scared, Sunny. I felt helpless and I hated it and everyday waking up and knowing that you might be out there somewhere in a ditch or in a black plastic bag or –"

"Hey." Daniel was startled from his rant by the pads of Harry's fingertips pressing against his cheek. Harry's eyes were suddenly too close, far closer than they had been in years, and Daniel couldn't help but think that Harry was so much easier to read up close. There was no denying the guilt mixing with determination and care and so many other emotions he couldn't grasp. "Breathe." Harry said softly and Daniel took a large shuddering breath, realizing suddenly that he'd caught the last breath in his chest. Harry's eyes searched his carefully before he retracted his touch and leaned back, his elbow on his right leg stretched out before him with the other curled beneath him.

"I'm sorry." Daniel said with a shaky breath, feeling ashamed suddenly for a reason he couldn't really comprehend.

"Don't be." Harry's look was unreadable in the darkness now that there was distance between them again but Daniel knew better, knew that Harry hid too much between walls he refused to let down. "I did think of you." Harry began carefully after a moment of silence filled only by their breaths. "And I thought of John, and Sirius and mom and dad and so many others." He stared listlessly out the window. "Some things..." Harry said carefully. "Happen beyond your control and aren't for sharing... no matter how much I wish they were."

Daniel bit down on his lower lip, repeating the words carefully in his mind as he tried to gather together what Harry was trying to say. "There is something else involved, isn't it?" He said after a moment. Harry shrugged noncommittally and Daniel sighed. "Things are never easy when it comes to the two of us." He said morosely. "We're fifteen and we have both killed twice. A murdered is after my head and he's likely to take you down with me, laughing all the way."

"Not unless you take him down first." Harry said sharply enough to make Daniel jump in surprise. It was rare that Harry took such sharp tones. He was laid back, didn't let things get to him. "Voldemort is portrayed as a monster but he's just as much a part of mankind as you and I and all men can be killed." Harry's eyes drove sharply into Daniel's. "Just like Adolf Hitler died Tom Riddle will die."

"How can you say that and believe it?" Daniel asked in a strangled voice. "I'm fated to kill him and I was only barely lucky enough scramble away from him yet again. He outmatched me on a level that wasn't even funny – I didn't stand a chance and people are expecting me to kill him! I'm as good as already dead!" Daniel said the last sentences through Harry's hand, muffled when they would have been a scream. Daniel made to slap his hand away but Harry caught it with a warning look.

"Don't say that." Harry's was calm and smooth and unbidden a shiver travelled down Daniel's back. "There are people relying on you in this war, yes. But you shouldn't forget that the prophecy entails you to simply kill him. There's nothing about you having to hunt him down and kill him. In best possible outcome the Order would be able to trick him into a trap so that you can finish him." Harry removed his hand slowly. "The prophecy doesn't state anything about you doing it on your own, Tripper; it just says you have to finish it."

Daniel had to struggle not to break down. Harry said it with such a matter of fact voice that it was hard to believe that he spoke anything but the truth. Through all his life he had heard about being the Chosen One, the hero of the wizard world – the one who would finally stand up against Voldemort and win. And here Harry was telling him that there was a chance of survival, a ray of hope in the bleak future he'd come to imagine.

"This isn't a fairytale war, this is reality." Harry said softly, stroking black locks from Daniel's eyes. "And in reality there are always far more outcomes than a simple plotline has to offer."

"I wish," Daniel choked out, "I wish I could believe you." He wanted to. The words Harry offered was a comfort and lifeline he had been praying for. "I just don't know how."

Harry tilted his head with a quirk of his lips. "Consider it." He said, tapping the side of Daniel's head playfully. "I would never expect you to change immediately if at all... but the choice is there. Have the courage to take control of your life."

Daniel listened to the near soundless steps as Harry left the room in bare feet, leaving him with far too much to think off as he curled up under the comfort of his cover that night. Outside snow flittered down from the sky and Daniel remained awake, mind far away as his eyes listlessly followed the white flakes whirling in the wind outside.

No matter what age you are, or what your circumstances might be, you are special, and you still have something unique to offer. Your life, because of who you are, has meaning.

Rosy Rose

"He was calling for you," Arravia said quietly. Death didn't look up, hardly seemed to be aware of Arravia at all. The skeleton knew better and pushed at precariously balanced glasses as he moved closer to the robed figure staring listlessly at nothing. "May I ask why-"

"I did not answer?" Death's voice was gravelly and low, distant. "Do not overstep your boundaries, Temperance Foaley. Why I do what I do is no business of yours."

"Not even when you deny your duty?" Arravia was not deterred by Death's warning tones. "Your child was in need of your help after taking the life of a man yet you did not even appear to guide his hand and lessen the guilt."

"He is human." Death turned flickering blue flames towards him and they flared warningly. "I need to allow him to be such. I cannot control everything in his life... not when I plan to take so much from him..." Death's voice trailed off and Arravia could see the guilt that was ruthlessly swallowed by dark flames.

"So you are still planning on going through with it?" Arravia quietly asked. There was no answer from Death and Arravia sighed. "I ask you to at least reconsider. You have grown fond of him, be careful of making mistakes," he warned.

"Leave me," Death softly demanded. "You are-"

"Overstepping my boundaries." Had Arravia still been human his lips would've curled in disapproval. "Yes, I know." He turned and stapled on gangly limbs to the door, leaving Death staring after him with a decidedly odd feeling in his empty ribcage where his heart had once beaten.

Ace of Spades

It was just a matter of hours before the guests were about to arrive and Harry could be found sprawled out on one of the living room couches, deep asleep with one hand resting loosely on the head of the Rottweiler curled up on his stomach and the other working as a pillow behind his head. Several jealous looks were sent his way from the James, Sirius and Daniel who had gotten stuck with cleaning while Remus helped Lily put things together in the kitchen.

Harry had promised Molly that he'd help with the Christmas food and it had helpfully sprung him from being needed before the Weasleys arrived in an hour or so. Other than the Weasleys, Hermione and the Longbottoms Harry had been urged to invite his own friends with the promise of having a magic free evening. As promised he'd invited Luna whose father was apparently away on business, and against his better judgment he had invited John who had grown increasingly distant with his mother and who clearly was in need to some time away from her.

And Harry being who he was, how could he not invite him over despite knowing that the evening was likely to end in a spectacle that would soon be forgotten? With the Marauders, the Weasley twins and John and Harry who was no bad team either something was sure to go wrong. Magic was ingrained in wizards and witches as breathing was to mankind and Harry knew the likelihood of someone slipping up was high.

That said, he was prepared to shield John from the possibility of an Obliviate if worse came to worse. He hadn't discussed it with anyone but knew Sirius suspected something (the man was surprisingly good at reading him at times) and had been eying him with something akin to pride and approval.

Groaning in his sleep Harry mumbled something sleepily under his breath as he twisted and sighed in contentment, curling deeper into the couch. He was now on his chest with one leg on the floor and taking long snuffling breaths through his nose resting on his arm. Lupa who had tumbled to the floor as he shifted stretched her paws and jumped back onto his back. Harry let out a grunt but didn't wake as she curled down with a content sigh.

Daniel growled under his breath, resisting the urge to poke his wand into his brother's ear. When the Weasleys arrive Mom is going to ask me to wake Sunny... until then. Daniel twitched and continued to

scrub the living room table clean, arranging things neatly on the see-through glass. Lupa watched lazily, perking up as Lily came carrying a tray with cookies. Drool dribbled down from her mouth as she leaned forward, sniffing the tray hungrily and her paws curled in Harry's shirt, readying herself for a jump as she crouched.

"Lupa," her master's voice made her still, "lay down." Reluctantly with a longing look at the table she obeyed and yelped as her master's arms bent awkwardly and she found herself pulled and cradled under it. Harry's body shifted to accommodate her, curling around her. She had grown a lot since she became his and she backed her back into his chest with a long drawn out sigh of contentment, stretching out with her master's warmth and smell curled around her. Harry was back to sleep seconds after her.

The click of a camera went unnoticed by both and James grinned as he took in the pools of drool on Harry's green t-shirt, ruffled and twisted in position and the jeans that had slipped down to reveal yellow muggle boxers with little Christmas trees with presents beneath them and the always-there white socks upgraded with little green bows and the Merry Xmas written below them. Lupa had also been dressed day in honor and wore a large red bow around her neck. Prodding the collar around Harry's neck with the tip of his wand it turned into a matching red bow at the side of his neck. Biting down on his lips to keep from laughing James snapped several more photos before stumbling to the kitchen, just about ready to collapse with laughter.

He was not alone in finding the picture entirely too amusing. As the fire place flared to life and Daniel came sliding around the corner to greet his two best friends his eyes fell on the perfectly innocent picture of Harry James Potter. The drool had dried but the overall picture was still as ridiculous (or cute as Hermione and Ginny could both claim seconds later between muffled giggles) as James had left it.

Harry ended rolling off the couch as Daniel poked his wand into his ear, muttering something about "embarrassing brothers", face beat red. Harry pulled up his pants and managed a polite if slightly embarrassed smile as he shook hands with Arthur.

"I hope you brought me a gift." Hermione kissed his cheek after giving him a brief hug.

"Of course." Harry gave her a small smile. "I am a gentleman, after all." She made a disbelieving sound but squeezed his shoulder with a grin.

Ron put a hand on his shoulder with a friendly grin. "Do me a favor and don't go on any adventures during Christmas. Wait until after, will you?" Ron teased.

"I think they'd kill me if I dared something of the like again." Harry glanced at Daniel and Hermione who had sunken into a deep discussion and were bickering quickly beneath their breaths.

Ron snorted a laugh. "That's putting it mildly." They exchanged grins.

"Harry, it's been too long." Molly embraced him warmly.

"A pleasure to see you again, Molly." Harry said with a quirk of his lips. The doorbell ringing, however, tore his attention elsewhere and to the surprise of those in the room his face lit up in a brilliant grin. "Excuse me," he said quickly. A moment later he appeared beside Remus who'd been about to open the door, sidestepping him to open it himself and pull John into a big hug.

The younger boy clung tightly to him, breathing in the scent of his brilliant brother and feeling safe and secure whereas seconds before his nerves had been threatening to eat him whole while he waited outside. John was beaming as Harry released him. "Merry Christmas, brother." John showed him a package wrapped in green paper with a haphazard yellow bow.

"Let's put in under the tree," Harry said with a soft grin.

John tiptoed out of his shoes and flushed as Harry helped him with his jacket when the sleeves refused to cooperate. "John this is Remus Lupin, Daniel's godfather." A man with a haggard look and sandy hair sprinkled with grey but fierce and intelligent amber eyes regarding him with a look John didn't quite understand. "Remus, this is John Brown, my kind-of little brother." John shyly pressed closer to Harry at the introduction.

Lily appeared from the kitchen and smiled, offering a hand for him to shake after wiping them clean on her apron. "It's a pleasure to meet

you under better circumstances than last time." John flushed but managed a small smile.

"Thank you for allowing me to be here Mrs. Potter," he voiced sincerely. "Things have been a hectic at home so my mom had to decline her invitation."

"It's not a problem. And please call me Lily."

John stayed close to Harry as he followed him into the house. He hadn't really had time to appreciate the fine work of the Potter mansion during his brief visit while sick, but now he had a hard time not gaping at the simplistic yet extravagant hallway he stood in. A plump, red haired woman turned around as they reached the kitchen and smiled at them. "And who might this be Harry?"

Harry smiled. "Molly, this is my brother John Brown. John, this is Molly Weasley – her family is close to mine." John held out his hand but found himself pulled into a hug that made his cheeks flush and Harry cough politely to hide his laughter behind his back.

"It-It's a pleasure to meet you," John stuttered when he was released and he couldn't help but match the smile on the woman's face and he straightened slightly.

"The pleasure is all mine dear." Her look became apologetic. "Do you mind if I borrow Harry?"

"Sorry John, but I should probably stay here until things are under some form of control," Harry said apologetically as he began unload the many things Molly had been gathering up and telling her things had to be made in some semblance of order.

"That's alright." John felt nervous but was determined to be strong for his brother. "Your father-"

"In the living room." Harry's wet hand ruffled his hair. "Just out and to the right," he softly continued.

John swallowed and nodded his head, straitening with purpose. He counted seven redheads, eyes wide, before his attention was drawn to the black haired James Potter who looked enough like Harry to soothe his frazzled nerves and who welcomed him with a firm

handshake. "Merry Christmas Mr. Potter," John greeted shyly, holding up his package. "I was told to put this under the tree...?"

"Of course." The man smiled easily and John found himself relaxing slightly at the sure and open welcome and the grin that nearly mirrored Harry's.

"John!" Sirius grinned brightly, swooping the blond boy into a hug. "Not skipping over the amazing, great and beautiful Sirius Black now are you?"

"Remove the amazing, great and beautiful and I'm sure I'm hugging the right Sirius Black," John responded automatically and flushed as people laughed.

"Fellow prankster-"

"We meet again." Fred and George appeared, shaking both his hands with grins.

"Next time we will win." They leered at him and John laughed.

"In your dreams; No one ever beats Harry," he answered proudly.

"Hello," the oldest of the red heads called as he approached him with a curious smile. "You must be John."

"And you're Mr. Weasley," John responded, shaking the other's hand. "I met your wife in the kitchen," he added at the raised eyebrow. And I doubt he'd be her child...he thought privately, amused by the thought. He turned to regard to the other Weasley children, remembering what Harry had mentioned about them.

The man with long red hair and a dangling fang in his ear was the one who was the easiest identified and John marveled that someone could almost be as cool as his brother. "And you're Bill," he said, grasping the other's hand. "Harry mentioned you."

"As he has mentioned you, John Lyall Brown," Bill teased with a grin causing John to flush.

Having found the oldest it was merely a matter of counting down and John spied the second oldest. Blue eyes and a cocked eyebrow,

short red hair and an easy grin. Charlie Weasley was as handsome as his older brother with a short sleeved shirt that revealed an arm that had suffered a bad burn and tiny scratches and scars. "Charlie Weasley." The other said before John could blurt out his name and John took the offered hand.

"What happened to...?" John gestured curiously to the burn.

"Accident. Some things you shouldn't play around with." There was an odd glint in his eyes and a coughing laugh from Bill let John know it was an inside joke.

Shrugging his shoulders he turned to the boy that he had already met before. "Ron." He offered his hand but Ron didn't take it. "Great to see you back on your feet." The older boy said, smacking John's arm friendly as he'd done with Harry earlier and John grinned.

He turned to the last Weasley whose brown eyes studied his curiously. She was taller than him and he guessed she was a year or so older than him. Her hair was as red as her brothers but long and brushed away behind her ear with an absent gesture. "Ginny, right?" He offered his hand and her calloused hand grasped his. He blinked in mild surprise. "You play sports?"

Her eyes narrowed immediately and there was a warning glint in them. John didn't notice. "That's cool!" He grinned at her. "I play soccer, like Harry, but he also does a myriad of other things like baseball and the like. What about you?" He asked curiously.

"You don't think it's odd that I play sports?" Ginny cocked an eyebrow at the younger boy who looked surprised by her question.

"I am not a hypocrite," John told her after a moment of staring at her in bewilderment and realizing she was serious. "I mean, there's loads of girls that are better than me –if it weren't for Erika we'd probably be losing each and every game." He shrugged his shoulders. "I think it's cool." He said honestly.

"Good. Those asses," she jerked her head towards her brothers, "don't let me do anything with them because I'm a girl." She said this in exasperation.

John gaped at her. "Seriously?" She nodded, amused by his reaction. "Damn, they're missing out." John said in a bemused tone.

Ginny's smile widened. "I think I'm starting to like you. John, was it?"

Meanwhile, as Ginny and John were getting acquainted, Harry was trying to prevent the catastrophe waiting to happen in the kitchen. Harry had been cooking through muggle means for a long time – Lily and Molly hadn't. Although Lily was doing remarkably better than Molly, they were both struggling. Magic allowed them to have several things going at the same time with a flick of their wands. The muggle way demanded some more attention and you had to make it in some kind of order.

... He was working on it.

He was momentarily relieved from his duty as arms curled around his waist, and in a mimic of her actions at the station she rubbed her cheek against his spine. He could feel her smile through the t-shirt he was wearing. "Merry Christmas, Aes." Something slipped into the back of his pocket before she released him and stepped back, folding her arms behind her back. "I see you did what I told you to."

"I would have invited you had you asked for it or not." He tapped the side of his head. "I believe you just ruled off psychic powers but I am sure you have something odd spinning in that brain of yours."

"I am Luna." Luna said serenely. "I know all and I know nothing."

"If it makes you content to think so." Harry kissed the top of her head to his mom's mild surprise. "Merry Christmas." Luna smiled at him and standing on her tiptoes pressed a kiss to his cheek before slipping out of kitchen in search of her best friend.

"Something I should know about?" Lily teased as Harry returned to his duties.

"Answers will not be forthcoming," was the teenager's dry response. Lily laughed and shook her head, turning back just in time to prevent a pile of fruit from toppling over as Molly, frazzled, bumped into them.

"I don't know how they do it, those muggles," Molly muttered under her breath.

The Longbottoms appeared by the front door as well as they had been instructed and James invited them inside with light teasing and ribbing comments from Sirius who appeared to whisk Neville away.

Overall, people were enjoying themselves and the smell of food were starting to swirl through the air, inviting inquiring comments on when it would be done only to be shooed out of the kitchen.

Harry paused, balancing a large plate of turkey as the phone in his back pocket vibrated and fishing it up. He blinked in mild surprise at the name that flashed on the screen and opened the text message.

Can I come over?

His eyebrows creased in mild worry and placing the turkey on the table he made his way to the living room.

John was enjoying his time with Ginny who he found sharp with a witty humor which he had to admire her for. She looked up at something over his shoulder and John tilted his head, finding a phone before his face and his mouth opened with a silent 'oh' as he read the brief message.

"What are you going to do?" John asked softly, giving Harry his full attention.

"I'm not leaving her out there, you know how she is." Harry dragged a hand through his hair. "If she can't come here..."

"She's likely to go wondering off on her own." John smiled. "I know how protective you are of her Harry. Go talk with your parents. Worst case and we can stay at my place."

"Thank you." Harry ruffled his hair and John beamed.

"What was that about?" Ginny asked curiously once Harry left.

John startled in mild surprise, having half forgotten she was there. "Oh." He shifted uncomfortably, unsure what to say. Ginny wasn't the only one looking at him in curiosity as most of the Weasley family had been within earshot of the news. "Rose wondered if she

could come over and Harry wanted to make sure he had a place to offer her if it became too much to invite one more here."

"Who's Rose?" Bill asked curiously.

Unbidden John's eyes darkened and he had to shake his head to tear himself from the dark path his mind had immediately taken. "A friend of Harry's I suppose you could call her... although she won't agree with that." He grimaced, ignoring the curious looks. "You'll understand when you meet her." He paused. "If you meet her." He corrected himself.

Harry made his way back to the kitchen, having caught the giggling of his dad and godfather upstairs and quite content not to get stuck in the middle of their plan of driving his mom up the walls.

Lily was still in the kitchen, chatting with Molly as they finished up the last of the main course. Both women looked up as he entered and Lily looked at him inquiringly, having caught the text message and his sudden retreat. "What is it Harry?"

"I..." Harry frowned, shifted in the doorway – unsure how to phrase it. "Rosy Rose just texted me... would it be alright if she came over?"

"Rosy Rose?" Lily's eyebrows furrowed as she searched her mind for any recognition but found none. "I don't believe you've mentioned her before..." She hedged carefully.

Harry's mouth curled. "Rosy Rose is... special." He dragged a hand through his hair. "She's two years younger than John, turns eleven in three days." He shrugged. "Do you mind if she comes or...?"

Lily suspected she knew her son better than he expected because she could hear those unmentioned words traced in her head or should I leave?Whoever this Rosy Rose was she had to be important enough to Harry to ask her to come over, something he had only done twice so far with John and it was becoming all too apparent how much Harry cared for the blond boy.

"Of course she can come." Lily found herself saying, smiling softly as relief curled Harry's mouth into a smile. "Does she live far away or...?"

"She's already on her way I suspect." Harry clicked the buttons on his phone quickly, absently. "I'll go set the table for another person." Harry excused himself from the kitchen as he clicked send.

Of course, you know I could never turn you away. There was no response but Harry hadn't expected one.

"She's coming then?" John asked as Harry returned to the living room.

"Yeah, she'll be here in ten I suspect." He ruffled John's hair. "Do you mind fetching her present for me? I left it on my desk upstairs – I hadn't expected to see her in a few days at least."

John furrowed his eyebrows. "That's right; she was supposed to go to America with her mother – right?" He said unsurely. He wasn't nearly as close to Rosy Rose as Harry was but he tried to keep himself updated about the tiny girl. John knew what had happened to her and it made him want to curl his teeth in disgust. She was so small and she had only become more withdrawn since the accident.

John's eyes darkened, recalling her tiny figure cradled in the arms of his brother and he felt the same dark satisfaction that was so unlike him when he recalled Harry's words earlier that night when he'd held him as he quivered in disgust, unable to believe someone could be so cruel.

"Who would have known he'd found himself impaled through his cheek with a nailgun to the floor?" Harry's eyes had gleamed.

The doorbell rang and John jumped to his feet, making his way to the hallway where Harry had already opened the door with Luna standing three feet to his right with her head tilted to the side.

She was as tiny as always, her short wispy dark red hair curled around her face and framed her innocent little face in a way that should have been forbidden. Her large green eyes, almost as intense in color as Harry's and Mrs. Potter's, were staring up at Harry in adoration and a soft smile curled her small pink lips. She was wearing a black jacket and large pink mittens that looked ready to fall off her hands. Dark jeans peeked out, the lower half swallowed by black boots.

"Uncle Harry." She reached up towards him and Harry obeyed the command, easily lifting the four year younger girl beneath her arms and settling her on his hip. She snuggled into him immediately, even as she sat down and with the familiarity of someone who had done it many times before pulled her boots off, followed by her jacket that he had to tug her out of. He folded her mittens nearly on top the jacket and she stared up at him, a black turtle neck shirt that was too large on her, making her seem even younger.

"Hello Rose." John grinned as she perked up and peered up at him shyly.

"Little John." She responded and he had to smother a grimace at the nickname. "Are you celebrating Christmas with Uncle Harry too?" Rose asked, clinging to Harry and staring at him over one shoulder, tiny arms clinging to Harry's neck.

"That he is." Harry answered smoothly. "Rosy Rose, I want you to meet my mom, Lily. Mom, this is Rosy Rose." Rose buried her face further into Harry's shoulder but dared to peek up and her eyes widened.

"You look like me!" Rose said in awe, voice muffled by Harry's shirt as she stared at the woman wide-eyed.

Lily was equally as surprised. "I believe I do." She responded gently, eyes softening at the sight of large green eyes that stared at her in wonder. "Or is it you that look like me?" She teased the child.

Rose giggled. "What do you think Uncle Harry?" She asked eagerly.

"I stay away from the business of evolution." Harry said dryly.

Rosy Rose pouted and turned to John. "Little John?" She begged.

That expression should be forbidden, John winced internally. "I agree with Harry." He said without preamble.

"You always agree with Uncle Harry!" Her pout deepened but it was torn away as several Weasley's appeared in her line of vision.

Her eyes grew wide and John snickered. "I believe you've met your long lost family Rose." He teased the tiny girl. Rose's cheeks grew

red and she buried her face entirely in Harry's chest, embarrassed and uncomfortable to have so many eyes on her at the same time.

"Rosy Rose, meet the Weasley family. They're close friends of my family." Harry smiled in amusement as she managed a muffled greeting into his shirt, adamantly refusing to look up. He shifted her slightly on his hip. "Weasley's, this is Rose – she's a bit shy."

"Am not." Rose protested and she made the mistake of looking up. Eyes rounding she managed an odd sound like the squeak of a mouse and promptly returned to her position to the amusement of those watching.

"I believe it's time for dinner." Molly called from the kitchen.

There was a shout of "finally" from upstairs and Sirius came hurrying down the stairs, skipping the last three and launching himself into the kitchen. James came after him at a more sedated pace, looking like the cat that caught the canary and Lily's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

The Longbottoms were already seated and Harry gently managed to pry Rose from his grip so that she could be seated next to Alice. The brown haired woman smiled kindly at the child who managed a weak one back. Harry placed himself in the middle with John to his right and the other spread out around the table.

Lily couldn't quite withdraw her curiosity from the two muggle children seated beside Harry. The tiny redhead was staring intently on her food, careful not to spill as Harry conversed with John, turning now and then to the child to make sure she had everything she needed. Lily wasn't particularly surprised to find her sipping on a glass of apple juice supplied by Harry.

"Rose." The tiny red head looked up and blinked at her in surprise. "I don't believe I caught your full name."

"Full name?" Rose repeated curiously.

"She means your first, middle and last name Rosy." Harry told her from her right, eyes intense as he stared at his mother.

Rose's mouth curled into an 'o' of surprise before she smiled shyly.
"My name is Rosalie Lillian Dursley but most people call me Rose."

There was a sudden stillness in the air as people turned to stare at the child in shock and cutlery clinked against James' plate as he dropped them, mouth open in disbelief.

Family quarrels are bitter things. They don't go by any rules. They're not like aches or wounds; they're more like splits in the skin that won't heal because there's not enough material.

Relation

"Dursley?" Lily had turned pale and her voice was faint as she interrupted the sudden silence which had befallen the table. "Your mother... her name wouldn't be Petunia, would it?" A sudden blankness settled over Rose's face and she turned towards Harry imploringly. He shrugged his shoulders and the tiny girl crawled into his lap, burying her face in his shirt.

"After dinner, mom?" Harry asked, gently stroking her back.

"Y-yes." Lily stuttered, her eyes never leaving the girl settled in her son's lap. "Yes, of course." She turned towards James and cleared her throat. Her husband had to scoop his jaw from his plate and Sirius elbowed him when he didn't hurry it along.

"John?" It was Alice who was staring curiously at the blonde haired boy who flushed under the sudden attention. "You and Harry go to the same school, do you not?"

"Yes!" John lightened up and he grinned at her. "I'm two classes below him but he always finds the time to sneak by so all my teachers know him by name. And during break we play soccer together – or baseball or just tumble around with the other kids." His eyes gleamed and his teeth were showing due to the wide smile.

"Is that so?" Alice voice was tinted with amusement but still gentle in that particular way that was hers.

"Uh-huh," John scratched the back of his head. "Harry pretty much dominates all sports and whatever teams he's on always win." John declared with all certainty.

"Not always." Harry ruffled his hair. "You give me quite the challenge and I wouldn't dismiss Derek's charming soccer style so lightly."

"Derek always kicks the football into the wrong goal." John explained to Alice with a snort of laughter. "And we always place him in Harry's team to make it fair."

"Anything to double my effort." Harry grimaced. "That kid can make me sweat a bucket."

"He always insists on playing and he practically adores you, Harry." John laughed. "He keeps trekking after you like some lost sheep and whenever you kick the ball to him he kicks it backwards. It's hilarious to watch."

"I can't just ignore him." Harry made a face that was dangerously close to pouting. "He's a part of the team."

"You're way too kind sometimes." John stuck out his tongue followed by a laugh. "I would have plowed him over and told him to go wait by the sidelines."

"Well, I just can't do that." Harry defended himself. "Send the apples please?" He asked of Remus who was trying valiantly not to laugh at him.

"It's good Fleur isn't here, you would make her jealous with all that attention." Charlie teased his older brother who was watching the black haired boy at the other side of the table with sneaky interest.

Bill made a noncommittal sound in the back of his throat. "I doubt he would hold my interest were she here." He said dryly and Charlie laughed.

"Whatever you say bro." Charlie shook his head. "What is it about him that fascinates you anyway?" Charlie squinted curiously down the table. "I mean, I get it he's the muggle brother of the boy-who-lived, but really?" Charlie folded his arms across his chest and leaned back, tipping his chair onto two legs under the sudden hawkish eyes of his mother several seats down.

Bill furrowed his eyebrows. "I cannot be sure." He admitted. "I thought for sure I had nailed him but it's become all the more clear that I have only scraped the surface of Harry James Potter. It annoys me." He admitted, turning towards Charlie who cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Muggles are apparently superior in confusing you." Charlie decided. "Perhaps I should ask him for some tips?" He teased. Bill hadn't

gotten his job at the bank by luck. It was rare that the goblins chose to work with humans but Bill had an uncommon ability to read through the intentions of people which he had displayed wondrously and he had been employed despite his slight age. It helped that he was skilled in what he did and that his abilities sometimes trumped those several years his senior.

Bill harrumphed. "It would take more than some tip for you to escape my notice dear brother. Your thoughts are as clear as if they were written on your face."

"Who are you?" John asked curiously, peering at the shy brown haired boy across the table. "I don't believe we've been introduced," he hurriedly corrected himself after a look from Harry and offered his hand, "John Brown."

"Neville Longbottom." The boy smiled shyly at him.

"You go to the same school as Daniel and his friends?" John asked as he loaded his plate with some salmon and after a nudge from Harry dropped of some small tomatoes as well.

"Yes." Neville fiddled awkwardly. "I'm in the same house too, Gryffindor. Only Luna is in another house." He looked over at the blonde girl who had taken Rose's seat and was talking avidly with Harry. "She's in Ravenclaw, the house of the studious." He added when John gave him a blank look.

"And the Gryffindor house is for that of the brave." John mused as he sorted through his memories. "And Slytherin... the cunning?" Neville nodded. "And Hufflepuff values hard work, tolerance, loyalty, and fair play." This he said with certainty and at Neville's raised eyebrow flushed red. "Harry mentioned the houses and I thought Hufflepuff was the coolest." He admitted with a shy smile.

"Really?" Neville straightened in his seat and looked at him in surprise.

"Really." John stared at him. "Why?"

"Well..." Neville scratched the tip of his ear. "Generally Hufflepuff is considered a bunch of duffers." He admitted.

John stared. "Loyalty and tolerance is considered – Harry." John turned towards his pseudo-brother. "Whatever school Hogwarts is the students must be insane." John declared. "I'm so glad you don't go there." He decided and before Harry and several others who had been close enough to hear this declaration could question him about it John had already turned back to Neville, ready to declare the wonder of St. Mary Alice's school.

Harry laughed at the befuddled looks and sent John a fond look.

The evening flowed beautifully and of course soon it was time for presents. Eagerness saturated the air and the children had already gathered in the living room by the time the adults had finished their coffee and were ready to indulge the tugging hands and voices.

Sirius gave a loud whoop and swung up a startled Ginny, whisking her off towards the living room amidst loud laughter. James gave his oldest son an inquiring look and Harry shook his head. "I've got it." He said softly, carefully maneuvering the sleeping redhead in his arms as he rose. She yawned in his grip, shifting her legs around his waist and burying her face deeper into the crook of his neck and tightening the hold she had around her neck before falling back asleep.

It was almost painful to watch, James decided as he followed Harry into the living room. He's like a proud and doting father, James thought, and that's just bizarre. He grimaced at his own thoughts. He remembered when Harry had been little, about eight, and he'd come scurrying down the stairs – all starry eyed and mouth working rapidly as he slung himself into Sirius arms. He was a smooth talker already at that age, James thought in amusement, remembering the instant caving of his best friend as Harry talked him into allowing an early present. And, of course, if Harry got to have an early present then Daniel got to have an early present.

It had all been very adorable.

And now here was one son carrying what presumably was his younger cousin, pseudo-niece, and had his little pseudo-brother by his side, or nephew, James thought with a snort, imagining both kids looking up at his son and declaring him with all love Uncle Harry.

And his other son was also acting too old, brooding (but not for once - James noted with glee the begging eyes of Daniel waddling Lily into allowing him a taste of the cake) with a too heavy burden on his shoulders. So much is relying on him, James thought sadly, I wish there was something I could do to ease the burden for him.

"Now!" Sirius had taken charge under the mutinous glare of Lily as he'd climbed her beloved table. "It is finally time for presents!" He declared with absolute glee. "As we're going by beauty, I, will of course, be the first to open my presents while you, my little ugly ducklings, sit by the sidelines and watch me rip those psychedelic papers open-"

"Sirius?"

"... Yes Lily-flower?"

"Get off my table."

"Yes Lily-flower."

To the glee of the youngest they decided to go by age and starting from the youngest and working upwards. John flushed when he had to go first and Harry grinned as the blonde dug forth his presents with light eyes. He was surprised to find four and not one as he'd expected and he eyed the ones from Harry's parents, The Weasleys and Daniel with curiosity.

Shrugging he tugged the paper of the present from Daniel and he let out a whoop of delight. "This is awesome!" It was a metallic model car, a truck painted in a dark but flashy yellow color with large steady wheels. It was designed so that you could drag it backwards and release it and it'd take off in a brilliant speed.

Harry sent Daniel a dry look at the orange Sunny signed elegantly on the side and Daniel shrugged, the picture of innocence.

John was slightly apprehensive about opening the present from his brother's parents but his fears proved unfounded as he pried the surprisingly box open and found a soccer kit including t-shirt and shorts from his favorite team, a new football, socks and, to his embarrassment, underwear.

"Thank you." John squeaked, bright red amidst the laughter of the onlookers.

The last present was a hand knitted yellow sweater with a large blue J on it that made him stammer his thanks to Mrs Weasley who smothered him with a hug for being so polite.

Ginny opened her considerably bigger pile amidst cheers and whistles especially from her brothers and Luna denied the privilege, saying she'd rather open them at Harry's room later that night. This, of course, earned him lewd looks which he calmly raised his middle-finger in response to.

Ron hurriedly pried his presents open and Harry felt smug at the fascination on his brother's best friend's face when faced with a Tamagotchi, a tiny electronical being you had to take care of by pressing one of the three buttons on the tiny screen. All magical presents with the exception of books had of course been put away and waited to be opened later but it was a considerable pile nonetheless and Ron struggled into his maroon Weasley sweater.

Neville followed, squeezing into his brown sweater with blue N.

Daniel and Harry exchanged looks and tearing their Weasley sweaters open tugged them on. Harry's were usually emerald green like his mom's with a yellow H while she had a red L and Daniel's red with a golden D. There had, however, been alternations made.

Daniel's sweater was white with a black devil woman, tail curling and leather wings spread and Harry's were black with a white angel woman, all wings and feathers and halo. On the back of Daniel's sweater were black angel wings and on the back of Harry's white devil wings.

People turned to Mrs Weasley who was leveling a dry at her twin sons who were trying and failing to keep their laughter at bay.

"I work better with white." Harry mused. "Change?"

"Change." Daniel agreed, and they switched.

Mrs Weasley apologized and promised to bring their real sweaters the coming morning (that said, there would be a simple flick of her

wand to turn them back to their original forms) but the twins only shrugged. "I quite like it." Daniel admitted and Harry nodded in agreement. The red-haired twins high-fived each other behind their mother's back and shot them thumbs-up with wide grins.

Harry and Daniel both received various little knickknacks. The more notable in Daniel's pile was the pile of books by Fyodor Dostoyevsky from his parents, a wooden flute from Harry that the older brother only shrugged innocently at and mouthed later. A small book from Sirius and Remus made him flush red and it vanished out of sight before anyone could get a closer look at it. The Defence Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration and Charms books earned Harry a shocked look from John. "I told you my family is avid believers of witchcraft and wizardry and practice it in their spare time." Harry whispered to John who looked like he couldn't quite believe it was actually true.

Indeed, Daniel hadn't been the only one to receive one of these strange books and John could only stare, deciding that Harry was probably the only sane one in the Potter family after discreetly skimming the backside of a particularly thick tome describing how to get in contact with 'your inner animal'.

Superstition had never been his thing. John didn't believe that there was a higher being above nor did he believe in the Big Bang theory or any strange otherworldly powers and creatures. He was stuck somewhere in between, just accepting that things were as they were and that Harry was reliable enough to believe in.

Harry was real and that was enough for John.

Harry received an mp3 player along with a pair of black headphones from his parents that his attention had to be torn from by insistent elbowing as he was immediately distracted. Hermione had bought him a glass bottle of perfume from a line called manly magical fragrance (feminine had notable been crossed out and manly sighed with an elegant inky script) that smelled of apples and that earned her a strange sound of delight and a hug.

The same book Daniel curled his mouth into a wry smile. "It's not like it is some great mystery." This earned him owlish stares from Sirius, Remus and Daniel. "It might do some good for you,

however." Harry mused and handed it to John who flushed and grinned.

"Brilliant." John murmured, tracing the golden letters of the black book and grinning: A Guide to Women by Felicia Grönlund. "Absolutely brilliant." He pocketed it reverently and grinned at Harry who rolled his eyes.

From Ron he was surprised to find a Transformers toy, more specifically Prowl – a favorite of his from his youth and he flushed ever so slightly. "Daniel mentioned you'd wanted one since you were little." Ron grinned at him. "I thought the SIC might be a good one to start the collection with."

"It's brilliant." Harry told him, fiddling with the plastic body foldable into a police car with a nostalgic smile.

Hermione received a necklace from Ron that made her blink in mild surprise. It was simple, a silver chain with a pink flower hanging from it and he flushed and muttered something beneath his breath when she turned towards him inquiringly. Harry who sat close translated with a whisper into her ear: "He said it made him think of you." And he grinned as she flushed, thanking Ron with a shy grin that only made his blush darken further.

Harry had went out of his way to buy her a soft pink button coat which he after much discussion with Lily and heavy guessing had managed to fit to her with near perfection, loose enough to fit thicker sweaters under it and still be comfy but still fit enough to be used with thin sweaters as well. He had stumbled across a golden pin of a lioness purely by luck and had nailed it neatly to the coat.

"Perfect match." Hermione touched the necklace at her throat and grinned at them both. "Thank you."

"Now you both make me look bad." Daniel grumbled teasingly as Hermione pulled the paper of his present to find a thick tome.

Many presents followed and Harry laughed at the abject horror in Sirius face as he pulled a Slytherin scarf from his package that he according to Christmas tradition had to wear and tied with trembling fingers around his neck.

His bleak thank you was music to Harry's ears.

The real present had been left neatly on Sirius bed for when he went to bed and Harry hoped he'd appreciate the fine whisky he'd managed to get Jonah to buy. For now, he was content to bask in the paleness of his godfather's face and the eyes that promised retribution.

Harry and Luna snuck out in the middle of the mess, leaving Rose in the care of Lily and John. The former looked hesitantly at him but Harry jerked his head and tapped his left wrist and John nodded, lapsing back into conversation with Ginny and Neville.

Harry helped Luna balance her pile of presents. It wasn't that they were that many but she seemed to have received several large packages and Harry could only shake his head in bemusement as she moved fluidly before him. It was with all familiarity she stepped into his room and without pausing sunk elegantly down on the end of his bed, eyes expectant.

Harry carefully unloaded the packages and made to hand her the first one when she shook her head. A brief pause later and Harry was carefully cradling the small somewhat awkwardly wrapped present with neon blue paper with spotted in green with little holes in.

"Merry Christmas." Harry said, gently tipping it into her waiting hands.

"Merry Christmas." Luna smiled at him and Harry had to appreciate the picture she made. She had forgone wearing a dress robe like the other females and instead wore a canary yellow muggle dress that followed her slim form and flared out slightly at her hips. The tights she was wearing were blue and the scruffy loose boots she was wearing an even darker blue. Her dirty blond hair had been carefully braided with blue and yellow feathers to match her clothes and she had even gone as far as to have a sprig of the feathers dangling from each ear. One leg slung over the other, eyes carefully inspecting the package she was an exotic addition to his room.

"You look beautiful." Harry told her, crouched down on the floor where he absently inspected one of the packages.

Luna looked up, tilted her head. "Thank you, Aes." She smiled at him. "You made quite the picture yourself. Quite adorable if I do say so myself. And I do say so myself." Luna said in that straight hand way of hers that made his lips twitch.

"Adorable?" Harry dragged a hand through his hair. "I suppose adorable is as good a word as any."

"It is a word." Luna carefully began untying the pink and blue tie. "And it describes you. Of course it is a good word."

"Indeed." Harry grinned at her. "Handsome I've heard, adorable is a first. Still, I must say I enjoy it."

"Most boys would take offence to the term." Luna said, pausing to peer at him. "You do not?"

"I am not like most boys." Harry offered with a shrug. "If I can call you beautiful, then by all means you can refer to me as adorable. Nothing works one-way; it's a stupid way to think." Harry shrugged. "I am a boy, you are a girl – however, we're both of mankind. I like to think in even terms."

"You are strange." Luna told him.

"So I am." Harry agreed.

"And people call me strange." Luna told him absently.

"All the best people are strange." Harry rolled his shoulders smoothly. "What is normality in a world where normality cannot be defined?"

"Normality is an illusion, a comfort." Luna tugged off the last piece of sellotape and carefully unfolded the paper to find a simple brown box. "For humans illusionary belief is a must." She gently pried the holed lid open and Harry's grin reached new proportions as her eyes widened in momentary surprise followed by delight.

"Is this what I think it is?" She breathed, gently lowering her finger into the box as an offered perch. There was a shuffle and her grin widened, eyes swimming with happiness as she pulled her finger out to reveal a tiny scruffy kind of creature with brown fur sticking out in

every direction as it made a strange melodic crooning sound, rubbing its tiny head against Luna's finger. It looked much like a tiny monkey but its paws lacked fingers and were more like pads and long arms that held to Luna tightly and there were no eyes or nose, just a mouth.

It gave an excited little sound that sounded like a chirp.

"There are many things that I could have given to you." Harry commented in amusement as Luna lifted the small creature up to eye level. "But I think this is easily the one which would brighten your day the most and it was easy enough to get a hold of. The matter of a license was another thing but I have a contact in Sweden that helped me out. So now it's legally yours, on paper and everything."

"I've always wanted one of these." Luna said softly, scratching the small being under its chin. "But daddy always said that the paperwork wasn't worth it."

"I think it is. Simians are sweet creatures and very faithful. There isn't anything peculiar about them, no invisibility or anything of the sort... but they're special in their own way, like you." Harry grinned at Luna. "And as cheesy as that sounded, how could anyone deny the truth in that?" She didn't answer and Harry leaned an elbow against one knee, using it to support his chin. "What are you going to name her?"

"Aia." Luna said simply. "Her name is Aia."

Ace of Spades

"Harry?" Lily knocked softly on the door and after a brief moment of hesitation stepped inside. Most of the guests had already left with the exception of John and Rose who were both asleep in one of the guestrooms down the hall, as well as Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Neville and Fred and George. Sirius and Remus as well lay snoozing downstairs on the living room couches.

She found Harry snoring softly on his bed, one hand thrown beneath his head and one resting on his stomach. Closing the door behind her Lily walked on silent steps to the bed and gently touched her

oldest son's face. Harry stirred beneath her touch and blearily blinked awake.

"Mom?" His voice was grouchy with sleep and he rubbed at his tired eyes. "Sorry, I fell asleep."

"Don't worry about it." Lily sat down at the foot of his bed as he struggled to sit up with a groan. "About Rose..."

"Yes – yes, of course." Harry sighed, a regretful look in his eyes. "I should have told you earlier but it never came up." Lily wondered if Harry just hadn't been able to trust her enough and knew how brief and light their conversations had been. There had been no delving beneath the surface, no inquiries of his well being other than finding it returned with a simple I'm fine.

"So she's my-"

"Niece, yes." Harry agreed.

"Does she know?" Lily asked faintly. "That I'm her-"

Harry shook his head. "Rose is not... she's not ready to be faced with such information. She doesn't know I'm her cousin, that we're even related. Her family did a cruel thing to her and her mind... it doesn't work the way it's supposed to. She doesn't sort and relate to things as we do." Harry sighed heavily. "She doesn't work well with male relatives or female, hence the reason she's here and not with her mother. Petunia..." Harry dragged a hand through his hair. "Rosy Rose just doesn't trust her."

"Why is that?" Lily's face had gone pale. "What happened to Rosalie?"

"Things that aren't supposed to happen to children." Harry's eyes darkened with spite. "Things that aren't supposed to happen to anyone." He folded his arms across his chest. "All Petunia did was stand and watch and Rosy Rose will never be able to forgive Petunia for that, no matter how much that woman wished she would."

Lily mulled that information over, eyes dark and face pale as her mind conjured reasons for her son's anger.

"Why does she call you Uncle Harry?" Lily's voice was weak and she felt exhausted.

"I don't know." Harry admitted. "Perhaps it's her way of showing her trust? I would not know. I cannot know unless she tells me." There were a hint of frustration in his voice and his eyes were sad. You just can't stop caring, can you Harry? Lily thought sadly but not without pride.

"Is there anything I can do?" Lily asked, thinking about the tiny red head in the other room that looked so much like her and knowing she would have to have a talk with her sister and that soon.

Harry rolled his shoulders in a smooth shrug. "Be there for her if you can." He offered. "Don't try to be too overbearing but make sure she knows that she can come to you... if that is alright with you?" He gave her an inquiring look. "I've told her before to come to you if I weren't to be found." He admitted. "Is that-"

"Alright? Yes – of course." Lily smiled softly. "Thank you." She was embarrassed by the tears that threatened to escape. "For trusting me that much."

"She's family, we're all family. And family takes care of each other."

Lily wondered if it was a reminder or simple fact as she closed her eyes that night.

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